3 1761 04296 3819

THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME X

The [illegible]

George [illegible]

Private [illegible]

Volume V

The Mysteries of the [illegible] of Paris

Privately [illegible]
For Members of
The Oxford Society
[illegible] Boston

LOUISA STANLEY

Photogravure from original by Merrill.

The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Venetia Trelawney

Volume V

The Mysteries of the Court of London

Privately Printed
For Members of
The Oxford Society
London Boston

De Luxe Edition

Of this edition, printed for members of The Oxford Society, but One Thousand copies have been issued, of which this is copy

No. 560

PR
5221
R35M9
1860
V.10

LIBRARY
MAR 12 1965
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

967564

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Sequel	1
II.	The Disinterment	13
III.	More Pearls from the String	20
IV.	The Unwelcome Visitress	33
V.	The Last Pearl	43
VI.	The Private Apartments	50
VII.	The Supper Devourer	57
VIII.	Conclusion of the History of Sellis	68
IX.	The Doomed Woman	79
X.	The Guillotine	97
XI.	Valentine and Venetia	106
XII.	Nature's Better Feelings	116
XIII.	Scenes in the Dane John	125
XIV.	The Mother and Daughter	136
XV.	The Maiden's Chamber	148
XVI.	Apprehensions and Suspicions	161
XVII.	Clara	169
XVIII.	The Mysteries of the Past	177
XIX.	Continuation of the Mysteries of the Past	188
XX.	Conclusion of the Mysteries of the Past	206
XXI.	Clara at Home	222
XXII.	The Sick-bed	228
XXIII.	The Catastrophe	241
XXIV.	Louisa's Lover	250
XXV.	The Young Nobleman	259
XXVI.	The Cliff	269
XXVII.	The Gathering of a Storm	277
XXVIII.	The Old Fence's Abode	290
XXIX.	The Hangman's Proceedings	302
XXX.	The Corpse — The Secret Chamber	310
XXXI.	The Deserted Mistress	319

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXXII.	The Captain's Visit	327
XXXIII.	The Intriguing Mother	335
XXXIV.	The Intended Husband	342
XXXV.	The Brother and Sister	350
XXXVI.	Doctor Dupont's Establishment	360
XXXVII.	Lake Leman	375
XXXVIII.	The Delicate Commission	384
XXXIX.	The Dark Hour	391
XL.	The Abduction	401
XLI.	The Fair Captive	409
XLII.	Various Proceedings in Different Quarters	420
XLIII.	Lechmere Grange	429
XLIV.	Conclusion	436

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
LOUISA STANLEY (*See Page 148*)	*Frontispiece*
"APPEARED UPON THE THRESHOLD"	151
"THE NEXT INSTANT OVER THEY WENT"	274
LAKE LEMAN	375

THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE SEQUEL

The command of Lady Ernestina was peremptory enough for the Hangman to take his departure, but still he moved not. That is to say, though he quailed and even grew afraid in her presence, for there was something terrible in her wrath, yet he did not issue from the room. A sort of unknown fascination kept him there. He felt as if circumstances had now so mixed up her fortunes with his own that he must not abandon her. Or perhaps, in his own savage, brutal style, he entertained a fancy — we dare not use the word affection — for that splendid patrician creature of whose person he had ere now possessed himself. But whatever the feeling were, certain it is that he lingered in her presence, unable to leave, yet not knowing how to propitiate her.

"Do you hear what I have said, and do you mean to obey?" she asked, the words hissing with subdued rage between the portals of those lips which had so recently been polluted by the hot kisses of the ruffian who stood before her.

"The plain truth of it is, ma'am," he answered, "I will not leave you. I don't want to have the hanging of such a beautiful creature as you are. You are too handsome to die on the gibbet. My arm has been around your neck, and I should not like to have to put a rope there. Understand me, then. If you stop you will be hanged; your only safety

is in flight. Remember, hanging is an awful death — I've seen plenty of it, and should know."

Let the reader conceive what would be his sensation if, for instance, on getting out of bed in the dark, he stepped with his bare foot upon a huge snake coiled up in cold, clammy, loathsome folds upon the floor. But if on leaping forward to escape from that snake, another reptile was trodden upon, and then another and another, encountering the bare feet in quick succession, while the individual, in frenzied horror, was flying toward the door, would not the sensations thus experienced be the realization on earth of some of the most poignant pains characteristic of Satan's kingdom? But not more horrible could such sensations be than those which Lady Ernestina felt crowding one upon another as the Hangman addressed her in that speech every sentence of which smote her like a fresh outrage or seized upon her like a new anguish. She writhed, oh, she writhed convulsively, and it was a strong and awful writhing, too, that thus pierced through her graceful, elegant, and voluptuous form. The same effect was visible upon her features, and as the Hangman spoke of her neck which he had encircled with his arm, and which he would willingly save from the contact of a halter, she bit her lip almost till the blood came in order to prevent herself from shrieking out, while the whole aspect of her countenance at that instant showed that a scream was passing behind it.

But all in a moment, when the Hangman had done speaking, a change came over her. It was a change so complete and so abrupt that it could only have arisen from the quick flashing of some new thought to her mind, prompting a change in her plans all in an instant.

"You are sincere in wishing to serve me?" she said, in a cold, almost freezing tone.

"I am — on my soul I am," answered the Hangman, speaking with perhaps more genuine sincerity than ever he had shown in all his life before.

"And you will assist me to escape?"

"Don't I keep on recommending it as much as I can?"

"But I will not issue forth by the route you have proposed," said Ernestina, in a tone of decision. "I cannot go climbing over walls from yard to yard."

" Then perhaps you know a better way? " rejoined the Hangman, inquiringly.

" Yes, there is another means of issue from this house," said Ernestina.

" Well, so much the better. Any way will do if it don't lead into Albemarle Street, where the runner is watching. Come, there is no time to lose."

" It is through the secret apartments that we must proceed," remarked Lady Ernestina, " and thither must we repair with the utmost caution. But it is now two o'clock in the morning. The guests are gone, the house is quiet. One minute, and I shall be prepared to take my departure."

With these words, Lady Ernestina proceeded to arrange her dress, and also to put up the shining masses of her hair. She then resumed her cloak and bonnet, and having listened for a few moments on the landing to convince herself that everything was quiet in the house, she returned to the toilet-table, took up a wax taper in her hand, and beckoning to the Hangman, said, " Now come."

Noiselessly did they descend the stairs, and on the landing below, Lady Ernestina opened the door leading into the bedroom communicating with the dressing-room whence there was a secret entrance into the private apartments. Traversing this bedchamber, — the same which Ariadne Varian had occupied, — Ernestina conducted the Hangman into the room containing the mechanical chairs. This place the fellow knew well, for twice before had he been in these apartments, — once when he was found captive in the chair by Lady Ernestina and the prince, and the other time when employed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon to aid his scheme in rescuing Venetia from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson.

" Everything is just the same as when I last saw it," observed Coffin, as on following Ernestina into this room with the mechanical chairs he swept his eyes around. " But which way is it now, my beauty, that we are to go? I hope through the gallery yonder, because I think the mere look of some of the pictures and statues there would make you love even your humble servant, Dan'el Coffin."

" Silence! — no jesting! " cried Lady Ernestina. " There! pass on that way. I follow you."

She did indeed point to the gallery, and Coffin unhesi-

tatingly proceeded toward the door opening into the museum of artistic indelicacies and exquisite immoralities. But just at the very moment that the Hangman was passing by one of the mechanical chairs, Lady Ernestina, dropping the taper, threw herself suddenly upon him, and with one almost superhuman effort flung him, as it were, into the chair. The sharp clicking noise was heard of the mechanism giving way, and as a terrible imprecation burst from the ruffian's lips, he was caught fast by the arms and shoulders, thus being rendered a captive and powerless all in a moment.

The taper was extinguished, the room had been plunged into pitchy darkness, but Ernestina's laugh of irony and triumph fell like that of a mocking fiend upon the Hangman's ears.

" Come, now," he growled, savagely, " what's the use of such a scurvy trick as this? "

" The use of it is," responded the lady, in low but measured accents fraught with all the concentration of a fearful vengeance, " to punish you as you deserve for the diabolical outrage you have perpetrated upon me this night. Miscreant, monster that you are! I could have endured, I could even have forgiven, everything but that. The very fountains of my existence are now poisoned at their source, the springs of my life are envenomed and corrupted. You have made me feel what it is to be utterly polluted. I am now loathsome to myself; I feel that I have become a mass of moral rottenness. I do not want to live, I cannot live. But ere I die my vengeance must be wreaked upon you, a bitter, burning, implacable vengeance, such as can only come from a heart fed with the fires of hell. Such a vengeance is this which I am inflicting upon you. For here will you remain to starve, to perish with hunger, with thirst, and in the exhaustion of frenzied and unavailing efforts to release yourself from that captivity."

" Devil of a woman that you are! I hate you now," exclaimed Coffin, gnashing his teeth with rage, " as much as I have been loving you."

" Oh, pollute not the sacred name of love by breathing it from your toadlike lips! " exclaimed Ernestina, her voice thrilling as if full well calculated to pierce the brain and to bear upon its breath the blight of a withering curse. " Here will you linger for a brief space, enduring all the horrors of

starvation, suffering the most torturing cramps in every limb through being retained in one fixed position, and when in your last agonies you implore Heaven to send some one to your succour and your prayer remains unheard, then think of the burning coals of torture which you have this night heaped upon the head of Ernestina Dysart."

There was something awful in this foreshadowing of a terrific doom, something appalling to a degree in that avenging voice speaking through the utter darkness which enveloped the man, and speaking likewise such terrible things. The Hangman was struck with dismay. Were a light there, he would have been seen sitting aghast, his countenance turned in the direction whence Ernestina's voice appeared to come.

"Miscreant that you are!" she resumed, "I could if I chose gloat my eyes with your dying agonies at once. I might procure a dagger or a knife, and thrust it deep down into that black heart of yours. But no, that would be putting you too quickly out of misery. I prefer to leave you to the endurance of all those slow tortures and lingering agonies which I have described, thirst that shall be maddening, hunger that shall make you frenzied and wild."

"Fiend, devil, demoness!" exclaimed Daniel Coffin, "your hatred and malignity make you insensate. How can all this happen in a house filled with people? Think you that I shall not be able to make myself heard?"

"Know you not," asked Ernestina, in a scornful tone, "that these walls beat back every sound which strikes against them? Nothing can penetrate. Oh, scream, roar, yell, howl, and cry, give vent to all the fury of your rage in the voice of a hyena, or to your savage ferocity in the tones of a tiger, but 'twill have no more effect than a child's whisper in calling succour to your aid."

"Think you, then, that I will not tear away this chair from the floor, or smash this mechanism which now holds me tight?" and as the Hangman thus spoke in a deep, hoarse tone, he strove with a tremendous effort to break the bonds of his captivity.

"Ah! have you succeeded?" said Ernestina, in a mocking tone. "No, toss, writhe, struggle, rage, and convulse as you will, there must you remain. And now, good night for ever."

"Murderess, you will yet swing upon the scaffold!" shouted the Hangman, in a terrible voice.

But Ernestina gave him no answer, and the next moment he heard the secret door in the wall quickly close, and then all was still. The miscreant was alone, and imprisoned as he was, enveloped, too, in the deep darkness, he began to shudder lest the avenging lady had indeed prognosticated his doom but too truly.

We must, however, follow the steps of Lady Ernestina Dysart. Having issued forth from the secret chamber, she did not ascend again into her own bedroom, but proceeding down-stairs she noiselessly opened the front door, and drawing down her veil, quitted the house. The heaven was still quite dark, but the street-lamps at once showed her a tatterdemalion form walking to and fro on the opposite side of the way. The instant, however, Lady Ernestina sallied forth, the disguised officer turned and stood still for a moment, but he was about to resume his lounging, shuffling walk again, ere following her at a distance, when to his surprise Lady Ernestina crossed over to him and said, in a firm voice, "I know who you are, I know what you are here for. I am going to Hanover Square. Follow me if you like."

The officer was certainly taken aback for a moment; but instantaneously recovering himself, he affected not to be able to comprehend what her ladyship meant. Not knowing what her object could possibly be, he fancied that this proceeding on her part was a portion of some stratagem, and therefore resolved to act in a way which should give her no opportunity of entrapping him into any revelation or admission that she might be seeking to elicit.

But having addressed him in that manner, Lady Ernestina said no more; and instantaneously turning away, she hurried into Bond Street, and thence by the nearest cut to Hanover Square. Not once did she look behind until she reached the house with No. 20 on the front door, and then, having knocked and rung, she gazed about her. At just a sufficient distance to enable her to distinguish the object by the lamps, but too far off for her to descry its aspect, she beheld a human form, and she felt persuaded that it was the disguised officer who had followed her.

Several minutes elapsed ere any answer was given to her

summons, but at length a servant, having evidently huddled on some clothing in great haste, made his appearance.

" Is Mr. Valentine Malvern at home? " asked Lady Ernestina, still keeping the veil over her countenance.

" Yes, he is, ma'am," replied the footman, hesitatingly, for he saw enough of the visitant to be assured that she was of ladylike aspect so far as her apparel was concerned. " But at this hour — "

" I am well aware of the strangeness and seeming impropriety of this visit at such an hour," Lady Ernestina hastened to observe. " But it is absolutely necessary I should see Mr. Malvern at once. Tell him," she added, in a less decisive tone, " that it is respecting the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson this evening, or, rather, during the earlier part of the night which is now passing."

" Walk in, ma'am," said the domestic, who, without understanding anything about the business to which Ernestina had alluded, nevertheless saw that her presence there referred to some matter of importance.

He accordingly conducted Lady Dysart into a parlour, where he lighted the candles; and as he quitted the room to report her presence to his master, the very first object on which her eyes settled, as she looked around, was a portrait of the late Sir Archibald Malvern. It had been taken only a few months previous to his death, and was what is usually termed a " speaking likeness." Ernestina felt herself shaken by powerful emotions, for she had loved that man tenderly and well, although with an illicit affection. Yes, and she shuddered, too, with a strong trembling, as all the circumstances of the fearful tragedy which cost him his life were brought vividly back to her memory. Then she fell into a profound reverie, from which she was somewhat abruptly startled in about ten minutes by the entrance of Valentine Malvern.

The young gentleman had not sought his couch when the servant knocked at his door with the intimation that a lady, who had given no name, demanded an immediate interview. He had retired to his chamber, it is true, but only to pace to and fro, in an uneasy and anxious mood, or else throw himself in an armchair and give way to his reflections. When the servant brought that message, a presentiment struck him at the moment that it was Lady Ernestina Dysart

who had come to him. She was not only uppermost in his thoughts, but she of all women could alone have any reason to seek an interview with him at such an hour, in so urgent a manner, and relative to the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson. He did not, however, immediately descend; he had to wait a few minutes to collect his thoughts and make up his mind with what demeanour he should appear in the presence of the woman whom he believed to be the murderess of his father.

Cold and reserved, with a mournful look and slow measured pace, did Valentine advance into that room to which Ernestina had been shown. He was well acquainted with her; he had often met her in society, at the time, too, when she was carrying on that intrigue with his father which he had so little suspected. He therefore now at once recognized her, as she raised her veil on his appearance, and that she had come upon the business which was uppermost in his thoughts, indeed, upon the only business on which she could possibly visit him at all at such an hour, he immediately perceived by the fixed pallor and altered, care-worn look that she wore. For it was a look of that nature which showed that it had only been recently stamped upon the countenance, as if by the effect of some evil intelligence made known within only a few hours past.

"You know wherefore I am here?" said Lady Ernestina, at once addressing Valentine in a tone which, though slightly tremulous, indicated a mind made up for even the most painful ordeal. "But in the name of God, do not believe anything downright outrageous against me. Culpable, very culpable I was, but only as so many women often are."

"In one word, tell me, Lady Ernestina, is my father dead?" asked Malvern, hurriedly.

"O heavens, yes!" she answered, bursting into tears; ay, and it was an unfeigned fit of weeping in which the pent-up feelings of the last two hours now found vent.

"He is dead! Oh, how could I have hoped otherwise?" and Valentine, averting his countenance, wept; but suddenly turning toward Ernestina, he clutched her by the arm in a paroxysm of uncontrollable feeling, saying, "Tell me how he came by his death."

"In the endeavour to save my honour," replied Ernestina,

now all in a moment wiping away her tears, and speaking with a deep solemnity of voice.

" And — and — you — you did not — "

But young Malvern could not, dared not even, finish the sentence, for he at once saw by the sudden glow which appeared on Ernestina's cheek, the instant before so pale, by the fire flashing from out her large dark eyes, and by the haughty wreathing of her upper lip, how indignantly she resented, depraved though she were, the terrible suspicion implied rather by the look which he had cast upon her than by the few broken words to which he had hesitatingly given utterance.

" Good God! have you indeed suspected me of this? " she exclaimed. " But I forgive you, yes, Heaven knows that I forgive you; for, after all, it is to me that you owe the loss of a father. But to suspect me — ah! I who loved him so well, so fondly, and was beloved so tenderly by him in return! " and as she spoke, the tears again flowed in a blinding torrent from her eyes.

" Lady Ernestina, 'tis for me to demand pardon of you," said the young man, deeply moved, " if by my suspicions I have injured you."

" Oh, do not for another moment let even your thoughts linger upon such dreadful suspicions," she exclaimed. Then, once more wiping her eyes with nervous haste, she took Valentine's hand, led him toward the portrait of the late Sir Archibald, and gazing up toward those eloquent features which seemed to look, to breathe, to speak, and even to smile from the canvas, she said, " Now, in the presence of that lifelike counterpart of him whom I loved so well and who is gone, and also before that high attesting Heaven which hears me speak, I swear that I am innocent of foul deed or treacherous play toward your father."

" It is enough, Lady Ernestina Dysart, I believe you, I am satisfied," and Valentine's looks bore evidence to the sincerity with which he made these announcements. " Pardon, however, the curiosity which prompts me at once to beseech a full and complete recital of the circumstances of my father's death."

" Oh, it is to fulfil this duty that I am come hither now," and with these words Ernestina proceeded to place herself in a chair so situated that while she was speaking she could

still gaze up at the portrait hanging to the wall, as if to prove that she did not fear thus to vindicate herself in the presence of that image of the dead one.

Valentine seated himself near her, and the reader may suppose with what profound attention and all-absorbing interest he listened as Lady Ernestina Dysart detailed the particulars of Sir Archibald's death, — how he had concealed himself in the bath, where suffocation had deprived him of life.

" Oh, Sir Valentine," exclaimed Lady Dysart, breaking off in the midst of her narrative, " I do not ask you as a son to pass a comment upon your sire's conduct, but as a man must you experience the loftiest admiration for that noble generosity, that chivalrous magnanimity which kept him silent, placing a seal upon his lips even when feeling the agonies of death gaining upon him. For you understand, Sir Valentine, that it must have been while the boxes and trunks were heaped upon the lid of the bath that the mortal warnings of asphyxia fastened vulture-like upon your sire, and he knew that if he gave vent to even the slightest moan he would betray me to a furious husband. He died, therefore, died to save my honour — O God! how I loved him! "

There was a long pause, during which Valentine Malvern sat weeping. Ernestina shed no more tears. Her eyes were hot and dry, her throat was parched, her thoughts were harrowing to a degree, for she reflected that she who had once been worthy of that illimitable love and transcendent devotion on the part of the handsome and high-minded Archibald Malvern was now a polluted wretch, loathsome to herself, and still reeking from the embraces of the public executioner. Oh, she felt that whatever frailties she had been guilty of, whatever crimes she had committed, her punishment had already taken place on earth and had been consummated that night.

After the long pause above noticed, she resumed her narrative, describing how her husband returned from France on a private and hurried visit to England, and how he discovered the corpse at the villa, recognizing its features.

" I need not tell you," she continued, " that on rejoining me in France, he covered me with reproaches. I merited them. But then he brought me to England, and proposed to me dreadful things as the only condition on which he

would help to consign the unfortunate tragedy to oblivion. Upon all this I cannot bear to dwell. Suffice it to say that in a grave dug deep in the garden belonging to that villa do the remains of your father lie, and with him is interred the silken ladder by the aid of which he ascended to my window. Oh, Sir Valentine, if you knew all, you would indeed acknowledge that I have been horribly punished."

"Unless I believe you to be a veritable fiend in human shape," observed the young baronet, in a solemn voice, "I must suppose that the wrongs you experienced at your husband's hands were of no ordinary character, for the proof exists that you were the means of surrendering him up to the hands of justice."

"Ah! the anonymous letter has betrayed that circumstance," exclaimed Ernestina. Then speaking quickly, she added, "But of all the deeds which stain my life, the conduct I pursued toward my husband is the one calculated to inspire the least remorse. It was a woman's vengeance, and though you will say that the vengeance was terrible, yet was the provocation of no common character."

"Lady Ernestina," said Malvern, solemnly, "I am not your judge, and have neither right nor pretence to hold you accountable for actions which concern not myself. Of your behaviour toward your husband we will therefore speak no more. But in this deplorable tragedy involving my father's fate, what course is to be pursued?"

"For my part," at once returned Lady Dysart, in a firm voice, "I have resolved not merely to tell everything, but likewise to dare all consequences."

"How learned you that suspicions had arisen against you?" asked Malvern.

"I saw that I was watched to-night," replied Lady Ernestina, not choosing to enter into any explanations that should compel her to speak of the Hangman or show that she had any connection with him. "My fears were excited. I cannot exactly say that conscience troubled me, since whatever share I might have had in your father's fate was unintentional on my part."

"I believe the explanations you have given me upon that head," rejoined Malvern, "and I can assure you that for more reasons than one I do not wish to give an unnecessary publicity to these details connected with my father's fate.

In the first place, I entertain no vindictive feeling toward your ladyship, and I should therefore be sorry to cause an exposure which would produce dishonour or danger of any kind to you. In the second place, I am in duty bound to do all I can to shield my beloved father's memory from reproach, and hence I can have no wish to drag to light an unfortunate amour which would stamp him as the seducer of a friend's wife. Under all these circumstances the matter must be hushed up as far as possible, and we will consult Mr. Sampson upon the subject."

" Be it so," rejoined Ernestina, still speaking with firmness and decision. " Even if he should insist on introducing the whole transaction to the cognizance of the tribunals, I am prepared to undergo whatever punishment may be awarded to me."

" Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the young gentleman, " I have already declared my belief in the truth of your tale, but as a duty toward the memory of my deceased parent, I shall assure myself by means of a surgical examination that circumstances support your statement, and if so, the tribunals would award you but a slight punishment for concealing the death, even if Mr. Sampson should insist upon dragging the transaction before them. But he will not, I am convinced that he will not," added Sir Valentine, emphatically.

He now looked at his watch, and found that it was nearly four o'clock in the morning.

" I would suggest," he continued, " that we should repair at once to Mr. Sampson's and hear his opinion, but I fear to overtax your energies, for you look ill, you seem as if you had been up all night."

" Let us go to Mr. Sampson's at once," said Ernestina, rising from her seat and drawing her veil over her countenance.

" Be it so," rejoined Malvern, and they issued forth together.

CHAPTER II

THE DISINTERMENT

It was between seven and eight o'clock on that same morning, when a hackney-coach drove up to the gate of the villa in the neighbourhood of Blackheath. It was still untenanted, never having been let since occupied by the Dysarts, but Mr. Sampson, who rode upon the box with the coachman, had obtained the key from the neighbouring house-agent who had the letting of it, under pretence of showing it to some friends in want of a residence in that quarter. The house-agent, happening to be a friend of Sampson's, was easily deterred by some excuse from either accompanying him and his party or sending anybody to show them over the premises.

When the hackney-coach stopped at the gate, Larry Sampson alighted from the box, while Sir Valentine Malvern and two medical gentlemen descended from the interior. The young baronet then assisted Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight, and when Sampson had ordered the hackney-coach to return in three or four hours, the party entered the grounds belonging to the villa. On repairing to the back garden, they found two men with pickaxes, spades, and the necessary implements for opening the grave, these men having been sent over by Sampson, with instructions to climb the wall and wait in the grounds for the arrival of himself and companions.

Sir Valentine Malvern and Lady Ernestina walked first, the medical men and Sampson following at a short distance. Malvern, with the chivalrous feeling of a gentleman toward a lady placed in most painful circumstances, offered Ernestina his arm, but she, with becoming taste, declined the courtesy. She felt how embarrassing it would be for

that young man to show an act of friendship toward the woman who, though unintentionally, had been the cause of his sire's premature death.

It was nevertheless with faltering steps that Ernestina advanced toward the spot where she knew the grave to be. She was well-nigh exhausted in mind and body, having been up all night, and having passed through so many phases of excitement. Indeed, she was only now sustained by that species of unnatural energy which arms a person when resolved to carry out a particular proceeding to the end.

Having lived for some time at the villa, she was of course familiar with every spot, and she could not fail to recollect to a nicety where the grave had been hollowed into which she had seen her dead paramour consigned. It is true that all traces of the interment had been completely effaced, but Ernestina was enabled to point to the place where the men were now to dig. They accordingly went to work, one of the medical men remaining as a witness of the proceeding, while Sir Valentine repaired with Ernestina, the other medical gentleman, and Lawrence Sampson into the villa.

Audible was the fluttering of the lady's heart as she crossed the threshold of the house where the tragedy had taken place. Be it remembered that the establishment was let to the Dysarts ready furnished, but we must here observe that in consequence of remaining untenanted for some months, the owner had sold off all the furniture, and it was now empty. The bath was, however, a fixture in the room specially appropriated for the purpose, and there was it found by the party now penetrating to that chamber.

No tears fell from Ernestina's eyes as she gazed upon it. Her eyeballs were throbbing and burning as when she left Malvern's abode in Hanover Square. A convulsive gasp, however, rose up into her throat, and she was compelled to lean against the wall to sustain herself. As for Sir Valentine, he was of course much affected on finding himself in the room where his father had breathed his last, and on beholding that bath in which the catastrophe took place.

Having remained in the chamber for a few minutes, the party descended to the garden again, and Ernestina, retiring to a short distance from the grave, seated herself in an arbour, there to wait the result of the proceedings that were taking place. The other members of the party, who had

been with her to the bathroom, gathered around the grave, and in a short time a considerable hollow was dug by the workmen. These men now prosecuted their labours with all befitting caution, so as not to strike their implements into the corpse, which they reached in due course. It was enveloped in a sheet, and the rope ladder of silken cords was found inside the grave. Thus every detail was precisely as Lady Ernestina had described it, and the dead body was borne into the house.

We shall not endeavour to probe the feelings with which Sir Valentine Malvern gazed upon the decomposing remains of the author of his being. Suffice it to say that he experienced all the grief which an affectionate son was sure to testify on such a solemn as well as sorrowful occasion. He then retired with Larry Sampson, leaving the medical men to perform their examination with a view to ascertain whether the deceased had experienced foul play otherwise than as Lady Ernestina described.

"And so, Mr. Sampson," said Valentine, while walking with the officer through the garden, "you feel that should the surgical report be satisfactory, you will be justified in allowing the matter to be hushed up?"

"Assuredly," answered Sampson. "In consequence of the various representations you have made to me, and with the justness of which I fully concur, I should consider myself to be acting officiously, instead of officially, in giving publicity to this unfortunate series of events."

"I thank you most sincerely for adopting so considerate and kind a course," said Valentine. Then, after a brief pause, he added, "Lady Ernestina is to a great extent to be pitied. She evidently loved my poor father dearly."

"But her conduct toward her husband," observed Larry, "was certainly of the most monstrous description, and when you say that she is to be pitied, I suppose you mean in reference to the sad transactions which we are now investigating, and not in respect to any other matter?"

"Lady Ernestina emphatically stated to me," rejoined Malvern, "that the provocation she had received from her husband was immense, and she as plainly and unreservedly confessed that hers was a woman's vengeance."

"There can be no doubt that Dysart was a man of depraved habits, heartless disposition, and unprincipled

character," observed Sampson. "However, with all that we have now nothing to do; and if the report of the medical men be such as to bear out her ladyship's statement respecting your father's death, I shall at once tell her that she may consider herself at large again. Hitherto all the circumstances of our investigation corroborate her tale. There is the bath, evidently convenient enough for a surprised lover to conceal himself in; and if we only fancy the lid closely pressed down, with boxes heaped upon it, it is not astonishing that suffocation should have ensued. Then, too, there is the ladder of silken cords, exhumed with the deceased, and serving as additional testimony to corroborate Lady Ernestina's statements."

In this manner did the Bow Street officer and Sir Valentine Malvern continue to discourse while walking to and fro in the garden. Presently one of the medical men was seen advancing from the villa, and Lady Ernestina, on perceiving him, at once concluded that the examination was over. She accordingly issued from the arbour and proceeded to join the group. Her countenance was still deadly pale and bore the traces of much internal struggling and overwrought feeling, as well as great physical depression, but at the same time her demeanour was collected and firm as if she had no fear for the result of the surgical scrutiny.

The medical man had joined Sir Valentine Malvern and Larry Sampson before Ernestina came up with them, but when he observed that she was advancing, he waited until she was present, so that she might listen to the report he had to make. He then declared in a solemn manner that from the examination which himself and his professional companion had made in respect to the deceased, there was not the slightest ground for questioning the truth of Lady Ernestina's story.

"In that case," said the officer, at once addressing himself to Ernestina, "your ladyship need not consider that I assert any further claim to your presence here."

"Your ladyship," Sir Valentine Malvern hastened to add, "may take the hackney-coach and return at once to London. I and the others must remain here for a short time in order to adopt measures for the removal of my deceased father's remains in as private a manner as possible from the neighbourhood."

To be brief, Lady Ernestina Dysart took her departure in the hackney-coach; and on her way back to Albemarle Street she congratulated herself upon her presence of mind in adopting the course which she had pursued toward Malvern and which had resulted in her extrication from a most serious dilemma.

But we must still retain the reader's attention at the villa. So soon as Sir Valentine had handed Lady Ernestina into the hackney-coach, he hastened back to rejoin Sampson and the medical man, whom he had left conversing together in the garden. He now found them with the other professional gentleman, and this latter, at once accosting the young baronet, handed him a small pocketbook, which felt damp to the touch.

"Before you offer a word of explanation," said Malvern, in a solemn tone, "I feel assured that you have found this about the person of my deceased father. And yet I recognize it not. I do not remember to have observed it in his possession."

"I have just found it," said the medical gentleman, "in a secret pocket in the breast of the deceased's coat. While left alone by my colleague just now, I happened to tread upon the coat, which we had previously taken off, and which lay upon the floor where we performed the examination. Feeling something thicker under the foot than the mere cloth of the coat could be, I had the curiosity to ascertain what it was, and, as I have already explained, in a private pocket I discovered this article. All the other pockets had been rifled. There was not even a ring nor a coin about the person of the deceased."

"Doubtless the money and valuables which might have been about your father at the time," remarked Sampson, "became the perquisites of the individual, whoever it might be, that Dysart engaged to dig the grave."

"The papers which this pocketbook contains," said Valentine, as he opened it, "do not appear to be much injured by the damp. But I will examine them hereafter."

He thereupon secured the pocketbook about his person, and then remunerated the medical gentleman with becoming liberality for the services they had rendered, and concerning which they were enjoined to the strictest secrecy, enough of the circumstances having been explained to them

to show wherefore it was desirable to screen the matter from the public gaze.

They then took their departure, and Sir Valentine remained with Sampson to deliberate upon the course which they should now pursue for the removal of the body.

"If you will leave the management of all this to me," observed Larry, after some discussion, "I will conduct it with the necessary privacy. My two men yonder, who have already filled up the grave, shall remain in charge of the deceased until night, and I will then come myself, with an undertaker on whom I can rely, and fetch away the remains in a coffin. They shall then be borne to your house, and I must leave you to give your dependents and friends what explanation you think fit."

This arrangement was accepted with much gratitude by Sir Valentine Malvern, and taking his departure from the villa, he procured a vehicle at Blackheath to convey him home to Hanover Square.

On arriving at his mansion at about five o'clock in the evening, he at once sent a note to Lord Florimel requesting an immediate call from his lordship; and when the nobleman arrived, Sir Valentine Malvern explained to him all that had taken place. He likewise gave him full particulars of the interview which had occurred with the prince regent on the previous evening, and having concluded his narrative, he said, "You must now hasten, my dear Florimel, and make all befitting excuses for my absence this day from your beloved niece. Tell her that having discovered my father's fate, I now remain at home to mourn in solitude for that death which, though long suspected, has only been proved a certainty within the last few hours. She will appreciate my feelings and will pardon my absence. Relative to all these details which concern herself, your lordship and your excellent lady will best know how to reveal so important a secret to my adored Florence."

Lord Florimel remained for some little while discoursing with Malvern upon the events which had thus so singularly transpired within the last four and twenty hours, and the young baronet could not help observing, as he reflected thereupon, that it almost seemed as if Providence had chosen to blend the threads of his own destiny with those of Florence Eaton's, for it was on repairing to Carlton House

to receive the revelation of a secret so nearly regarding her that he had found in the fragment of a letter the clue to that train of incidents which had so promptly led to the unravelment of the mystery concerning his father's fate. Lord Florimel himself was much struck by the circumstance, and on taking his leave of Malvern, he returned at once to Piccadilly to acquaint Pauline with all that had occurred, or, rather, as much as it was proper to reveal.

When once more alone, Malvern shut himself up in his own room and examined the contents of that pocketbook which had been found about his father's person. Then was it that with mingled amazement and sorrow he made a fresh discovery relative to the past incidents of his sire's career, a discovery concerning matters the bare existence of which Valentine had never even suspected, and which not only regarded himself but also others. In a word, a great mystery was now revealed; a secret was disclosed which, but for the discovery of this pocketbook, might for ever have remained buried in darkness. The revelation thus made imposed upon him, too, a duty which he must not postpone an hour longer than was absolutely necessary. In a word, he felt that the moment the funeral was over and his father's remains should have been consigned to consecrated ground, he must lose no time in the accomplishment of this duty to which we allude.

CHAPTER III

MORE PEARLS FROM THE STRING

It was between four and five o'clock on the same day of which we are writing that a handsome cabriolet, drawn by a splendid horse, dashed up to the front door of Leveson House. Everything was unexceptionable about the appearance of this equipage, save in respect to the groom who stood behind it. It was not that his livery was shabby, or that it was inconsistent with the dashing brilliancy of the "turnout." On the contrary, it was as fine as a gold hatband, a green coat with yellow buttons and plenty of lace, brown knee-breeches, and a new pair of top-boots could possibly combine to render it. But the defect was in the wearer, for most assuredly this groom was of a very singular, awkward, and unprepossessing appearance. He was thin, lank, and lean in person; his gait, so far from having the respectful assurance which characterizes a good servant enjoying the confidence of his master, was shuffling and shambling, while his looks were sneaking, downcast, and furtive. Indeed, he looked a veritable starveling, and seemed as if he were some whining, wretched mendicant who had been suddenly elevated from rags and the gutter to the full bloom of livery and a stand behind that dashing cabriolet.

When the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House, this menial crept down as if he were half-frightened lest the equipage should dash off and fling him on the curbstone, or lest the officers of justice were looking out for him in every direction. Indeed, he seemed altogether out of his element, but it must be likewise observed that his aspect was such as to render it difficult to decide what possible element could suit him. Sneaking along from the rear of the vehicle to the horse's head, he so placed himself in the shade of the

noble animal as if anxious to make it a screen to hide him from the view of all passers-by, and yet, as he held the bridle, a glance of satisfaction twinkled sidelong from his eyes as that look embraced in quick survey all the splendid features of the equipage.

Very different from the menial was the master who emerged from that dashing cabriolet. At the first glance he might have been mistaken for a bear escaped from the zoological gardens and dressed up in male attire, for he wore such an enormous quantity of hair about his face as almost to destroy the features that identified him as a human being. His black whiskers stuck out in great bushes, his mustachios were fiercer than any that are ever worn by an actor dressed up to play the part of a brigand for the stage, his brows were thick and overhanging, he wore an imperial, and his huge whiskers, meeting under the chin, were prolonged into a beard of which a pasha might have been proud. He was dressed in a semimilitary style, but with most outrageous pretensions. His frock coat was one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast, and as it was buttoned up to the chin, and therefore covered the waistcoat where the gold chain ought to have been, he wore this said chain outside his coat, a very little pocket being made to hold the watch belonging thereto. This chain was as massive and large as that of a sheriff or lord mayor, and therefore gave its wearer the appearance of uniting some civic dignity with his military rank. His gray trousers had a broad gold stripe down each leg, and were stretched tightly over boots brilliantly polished, with heels two inches high, and furnished with an immense pair of gold spurs.

Such was the phenomenon that emerged in stately grandeur from the cabriolet; and flinging the reins from his lemon-coloured kid gloves, or, rather, from the hands that wore them, he drew forth an embroidered cambric handkerchief so highly perfumed that it rendered the air fragrant.

" Now, Robin, take care of him," exclaimed Captain Tash, alluding to the horse, " and don't leave his head. Remember how he darted off the day before yesterday and discomfited the old apple-woman's stall. I am just going here to call upon my friend Leveson for a few minutes," continued the captain, exalting his voice in a bombastic style as some ladies and gentlemen passed by at the moment,

" and then we shall drive back to Carlton House. I am engaged to dine with his Royal Highness to-day," he added, in a still louder tone, so that the passers-by should not fail to catch the magnificent announcement.

Having thus spoken, while poor Robin looked as if he would have given the world to melt away out of the green livery and top-boots, and sink into the earth, the redoubtable Captain Tash stalked with an awful swagger into the mansion, the front door of which was opened by the hall-porter the moment his cab had dashed up to the house. The marquis was at home, and the captain was accordingly introduced into a parlour, where he was almost immediately joined by his lordship.

" Sit down, captain," said Leveson, in an affable manner, for he had good reason to be contented with the way in which the gallant officer had carried out the little commission entrusted to him.

" Devilish hot, to be sure, isn't it, Leveson? " exclaimed Tash, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

The marquis looked severe for a moment on being addressed thus familiarly, but smiling the next instant at the captain's impertinence, he said, " Very hot indeed, my dear Tash. What news? "

" Sackville has been going on at a glorious rate within the last two or three weeks," replied the captain. " He has taken such a fancy for the gaming-table that I could not possibly keep him away from it even if I wished."

" Ah, well," said the marquis, rubbing his hands gleefully, " so much the better, so much the better. Is he in want of cash again? "

" When I left him, half an hour back," replied the captain, " he was just screwing up his courage to go and tell his wife that if he didn't have twenty thousand to-night by eight o'clock he shall be a ruined man."

" Capital, excellent! " exclaimed Leveson, rubbing his hands harder than before, while the supremest satisfaction was expressed in every lineament, line, and wrinkle of his face. " How have you managed this? "

" He has been borrowing money on promissory notes, payable at sight, of the fellow who keeps the Golden Hell in St. James's Street, and I'll tell you what I have done," continued Tash, with as sly a look as could possibly beam

forth from the midst of all the hair that covered his face. "I have made this fellow write him a most peremptory letter, something in this style: 'My lord, if your lordship does not pay the nineteen thousand five hundred pounds for which I hold your lordship's I O U's by eight o'clock to-night, when the bank at my establishment opens, I shall be under the necessity of posting your name up in the room, and shall have you put into the *Satirist* and the *Age* next Sunday.'"

"And has this letter really gone?" demanded Leveson, almost in ecstasies of delight.

"By Jupiter! I saw it sent off myself at about two o'clock to Carlton House, and when I went at three to call on Sackville, as usual, I pretended to be fearfully indignant on reading the said letter, which he thrust into my hand the moment I entered his room. Lord, how I did swear against that gambling-house keeper! I called him all the 'd——d scoundrels' I could think of; and if oaths were things, and only as heavy as feathers, I am sure I swore enough of them to break a horse's back if they were all collected together and laid upon it. Of course Sackville appealed to me for my advice and assistance. He always does, I have made myself so necessary to him. Well, I assured him that the money must be paid, for that the gaming-house keeper was a nasty fellow and would do his worst. Then how was the money to be got? That was the next question. Could I raise it on a loan? No; all the money-lenders I am acquainted with had got plenty of his bills already. He walked up and down the room in great agitation, and at length exclaimed, stopping short, 'Come, Tash, I know you must have some sort of advice to give me, if you will.' Then I looked very grave, observing that the only thing I could recommend was for him to ask his wife, as she seemed to possess an inexhaustible treasure somewhere or another. 'No, impossible!' he cried, 'I dare not ask her for any more. Would you believe it,' he added, 'that the whole amount I have had from her during the last six or seven months has run up to no less than fifty thousand pounds?' I expressed my joy that he had a wife who was able to act as his banker to such a glorious extent, but I think he blushed a little and looked rather confused, as if he were not altogether pleased with the allusion. However, immediately recovering himself,

he said, ' Well, I suppose I must make up my mind to go and ask Venetia.' And your lordship may depend upon it that I urged everything I possibly could in order to make him follow up this resolution. So when I left him just now, he was going to Lady Sackville's boudoir to make known his wants and demand her succour."

" You have managed most admirably, Captain Tash," said the marquis. " Does Lord Sackville frequently hint at this mysterious source of wealth which his wife possesses? "

" On two or three occasions, when more communicative than at other times," answered the captain, " he has expressed his wonder where Venetia can possibly get so much money from; and once, when considerably obfuscated with wine, of which he had drunk great quantities in the desperation of a frightful run of ill-luck at the gaming-table, he observed that he knew very well it was not from the prince she received such vast pecuniary subsidies, as his Royal Highness himself was most frightfully hampered in that respect."

" Ah, well, it matters but little what Sackville says or thinks," observed Lord Leveson, in a musing tone. Then rising from his chair as a hint to Captain Tash that the present interview need not be prolonged, he presented the gallant officer with a couple of bank-notes for a hundred pounds each, saying, " You have played your cards excellently, and I am more than satisfied with all you have done. It is most probable that the necessity will soon cease for you to continue the work of plunging Sackville into these difficulties, — but, however, I will let you know in due course."

Thereupon Captain Tash took his departure, and as he issued forth from the Marquis of Leveson's house to reënter his cabriolet, he strode forward with so grand an air, with such a tremendous swagger, and with his immense bell-shaped hat perched in so singular a fashion over his right ear, that he looked not only as if Albemarle Street itself belonged to him, but as if the whole of the West End were his private property.

Immediately after Captain Tash had thus taken his departure, the Marquis of Leveson opened his writing-desk, drew out a private drawer, and proceeded to count the pearls which it contained. When he had finished, a smile

of gloating satisfaction and sensual triumph appeared upon his countenance, and as he locked up the desk again, he said to himself, " She will be mine, she will be mine! "

About an hour afterward, Lady Sackville's carriage dashed up to the house, and the marquis went forth to the very threshold in order to receive the brilliant Venetia, for whose visit the intelligence he had received from Captain Tash had so fully prepared him. She endeavoured to look as self-possessed and composed as possible, but the keen eye of the marquis could not fail to observe a deeper shade of seriousness on her countenance than he had ever seen before, and at the same time the glitter of uneasiness in her magnificent eyes. But he appeared not to notice this betrayal of emotion on her part, and with profound respect escorted her into the parlour where he had so recently received the gallant officer.

" I am come to draw upon you again, my noble banker," said Venetia, making a great effort to smile with a sort of dignified good-humour, but there was something sickly in it as she drew forth the string whence so many of the pearls had already disappeared.

" I am entirely at your ladyship's service," replied the Marquis of Leveson, " and believe me when I assure you, without flattery, that the happiest moments of my life are those when your ladyship honours me with your presence."

" Perhaps your lordship means to convey a little covert satire in that remark," said Venetia, with a perceptible bitterness in her tone. " You look upon each visit which I thus pay you as a step bringing me nearer and nearer to the catastrophe which you so confidently expect will take place? "

" I hope that your ladyship will acquit me of aught savouring of such rudeness as satire," rejoined the marquis with a bow, " for, believe me, Lady Sackville, I am incapable of a discourteous act toward you."

" And yet your lordship's antecedents do not altogether justify the remark," exclaimed Venetia, who was in one of those humours which compelled her, as it were, to vent her spite a little upon the very man on whose purse, if not actual bounty, she had come to make a large claim. " However, we will not dispute, my lord," she immediately added, recovering her wonted air of dignity mingled with exquisite

politeness. "I am in want of money, and have brought my cheque-book."

With these words she unfastened the string and prepared to take off as many pearls as would represent the sum she needed, while the Marquis of Leveson opened his desk and produced a large bundle of bank-notes.

"One — two — three," and thus did Venetia go on counting until she had numbered twenty, but when these twenty pearls had been successively drawn off the string, only one more remained upon it.

Raising her eyes toward the marquis, she caught the expression of triumph which had gradually expanded upon his features into actual radiance as he beheld Venetia detach all those pearls.

"Ah! my lord," she exclaimed, in a voice thrilling with exultation, "I have still one pearl left, and that shall never find its way into your hands. Even at the risk of making you repent altogether of your bargain and refuse to honour the demands which these twenty pearls represent, do I promise you that the one remaining here shall never, never depart from me."

"Your ladyship is the mistress to act as you choose," observed Lord Leveson, in a voice of bland politeness; and without even noticing Venetia's allusion to a possible refusal on his part to supply her with any further funds, he at once proceeded to count down twenty bank-notes each for a thousand pounds. "I believe that your ladyship will find this sum correct," and handing the notes over to her, he waited until she herself had counted them ere he took up a single pearl from the table.

"The sum is correct, and I thank your lordship," said Venetia, in a low and tremulous voice, for the remembrance flashed vividly to her mind at the moment that of all the six who had originally made her the object of their amorous pursuits, five had already revelled in her charms, and feeble was now the barrier which separated her from the power of the sixth.

His lordship consigned the pearls to his desk, while Venetia thrust the bank-notes into her bosom. She then rose and drew down her veil, to hide the emotion which she felt that her features were but too likely to betray. The marquis handed her back to her carriage, which immediately

drove off to Carlton House, and on arriving there, Venetia at once repaired to the apartment where her husband was anxiously awaiting her presence.

"There, Horace," she said, tossing the bank-notes upon the table with an air so strange that it even resembled a state of mind bordering upon desperation, "this is the sum you require. But understand me well, it is the last I shall be enabled to procure for you."

"My dear Venetia, you are very angry with me, or else you are much annoyed and agitated?" said Horace, approaching her with soothing looks and great kindness of manner.

"No, let us not enter upon any discussion," said Venetia, but still with an uneasy and almost wild look. "Suffice it for you that I have procured the money which is to save you from exposure and ruin; but let me impress it upon your mind that if you involve yourself in any further dilemmas, it will be useless to apply to me for the means of extricating you therefrom."

"Tell me, dear Venetia," said Lord Sackville, seized with an irresistible feeling of curiosity, "what is the source of this mysterious wealth of yours? I remember when first you assisted me with money, you led me to believe it emanated from the gifts received from the prince, but when I reflect upon the very large amounts for which I am indebted to your kindness, I am of course well aware that his Royal Highness has not the means of affording you such supplies. Besides, on this occasion, at all events, you have been somewhere to procure the amount now so generously placed at my disposal," for Venetia had not laid aside her bonnet and scarf ere rejoining her husband in the parlour where he had been waiting for her.

"Horace," she said, in a low voice, and at the same time fixing upon him a reproachful look, "if you have any compunctious feelings as to the mode in which I may have obtained these large supplies with which at different times I have succoured you, surely you would be just if not generous enough to take the full measure of blame unto yourself for those extravagances, vicious pursuits, and inordinate follies which have compelled you thus to appeal to my resources?"

"Good God! what mean you, Venetia?" exclaimed

Horace, recoiling from the idea which suddenly smote him as with the blow of a hammer. "Is it possible that you — you — "

And he hesitated, he dared not complete the sentence, but he gazed with a look of mingled agony and shame on the splendid countenance of his wife, that countenance which the warm blood was now richly suffusing.

"I know what you would say. You would ask me whether I have prostituted myself to obtain these moneys?" and her tone was penetrated with a poignant bitterness. "No, no, it has not come to that yet," she continued, her features suddenly lighting up with a feeling of satisfaction, "but the next time you demand money of me, I must either refuse you, or else — "

"No, no, that shall never be," exclaimed Sackville, with a shudder. "All my feelings as a man, as a husband, revolt against such a horror. When our compact was formed, — that compact which left us to follow our own inclinations, irrespective of all the ties of love or marriage, — it was that we might each pursue that career of fashionable pleasure which may be depravity in the true sense of the word, but which, at all events, should have nothing grovelling, low, and despicably mean about it. In a word, I understood that you might shine as the mistress of the prince, and bestow your favours where the whim or fancy prompted you, but to sell your charms, Venetia — no, no, never, never!"

"Ah! you would not, then, like to know that I became so thoroughly lost to every sense of delicacy as that?" said Venetia, surprised, and not altogether displeased at the vehemence with which her husband had spoken on the point.

"I should hate, I should loathe, I should abominate you," was the quick reply which Horace gave.

"Then you do still love me a little?" said Venetia, in a tremulous voice.

"Think you that having once loved you so fondly, so devotedly, so enthusiastically," exclaimed Horace, seating himself by the side of his splendid wife and taking her hand, "it is possible to have ceased to love you altogether? No, no; besides which, you are so beautiful, so grandly handsome, it were impossible to help loving you. Ah! if our destiny had been otherwise, if we had been permitted at the time of our marriage to remain in that comparatively humble

sphere which was properly our own, we should doubtless have been happier than we are now. At all events, our love would have flowed on like a pure crystal stream that is unpolluted, uncontaminated — "

" Then the splendours, the brilliancies, the pomps, and the honours of a court life are already losing their attractions for you, Horace? " interrupted Venetia, an ineffable tenderness stealing upon her and melting that heart the chords of which had of late vibrated to but few of the better feelings of human nature.

" Would to God," cried Horace, the anguished look he had before shown again sweeping over his countenance, which, though handsome as ever, had recently grown pale with dissipation, " would to God that I could throw off these golden shackles which a lordly title and a courtly office have riveted upon my limbs, ay, not only upon my limbs, but upon my mind also! Venetia, I am sick of it. This scene which is now passing between you and me has aroused in my mind feelings and sentiments long dormant there, and has revived many blissful memories of the past. Would to God that all this had never happened, that when we were married we had fled far away from those who had the power to coerce us."

" Yes, but we were so completely in their power," murmured Venetia, deeply moved by the impassioned language to which her husband had been giving utterance. " It is useless to regret all that has taken place — "

" But the future, Venetia," interrupted Horace, as he threw upon her a strange, wild look, " dare you plunge your eyes into the future? It is true that we may be elevated to a more exalted rank than that which we at present hold. The prince will no doubt fulfil his promise, and on the day when the death of his father shall make him King of England will bestow still loftier titles upon us. But of what avail will be the exchange of a baron's coronet for that of an earl, if life can be only passed by plunging into dissipations and profligacies of all kinds in order to escape from thought? Believe me, Venetia, had we at our marriage remained in private life, existing only for each other, and imbibing all our happiness from the pure fount of sincere and honourable love, never, never should I have crossed the threshold of the gaming-house, never should I have become addicted to the

juice of the grape, never should I have grown a voluptuary and a debauchee. But all this I am now, all this I have become in less than a year, — in a few short months, I may say; and in moments of cool and sober reflection I loathe, I hate myself. Heavens! you weep, Venetia, oh, you weep, and you, then, are also moved, you feel, on your side, the same as I do? "

" Yes, yes, my dear Horace," she murmuringly interrupted him, " would to God that we could recall the past, but it is impossible. Our destiny is fixed; we must follow it, we must obey it, and though brilliant in the eyes of the world, yet does it carry its own punishment along with it. Yes, because it will not bear the calmness of reflection, and in order that existence can be made tolerable, it must be an incessant whirl of giddy pleasures, frenzied enjoyments, and intoxicating delights."

" Oh, to live such a life on to the end! " exclaimed Horace, as if stricken with a cold shudder. " Nevertheless, as you say, dear Venetia, it must be endured. But at this moment I am jealous of you, I love you again as a wife, I am mad to think that these glorious charms of yours should ever have been possessed by another, — perhaps by others."

" Horace," Venetia suddenly observed, exerting herself with a strong effort to subdue her emotions, " this scene can endure no longer. I understand, I appreciate, and I share all the feelings which have been excited in your breast, but it is useless, worse than useless, to yield to these moments of softness and tenderness. We must fulfil our destiny, we must observe our compact."

" Yes, there is no alternative," said Horace. " But, at all events, there is a melancholy pleasure in such a scene as this, and methinks that it does one good."

" No, it is a weakness to which we ought not to yield," immediately rejoined Venetia, " because it cannot lead to any beneficial result. We know too much of each other, Horace, ever to experience again that sublime confidence, that full and complete trustfulness, which alone can constitute the true happiness of wedded life. On your side, you know that I have been unfaithful to you, and on my side, I know that you have been unfaithful to me. I use the word unfaithful to express my meaning, although it be scarcely applicable, for that cannot be rightly termed unfaithfulness which is the

result of agreement and mutually assented to. But what I mean you to understand is that, knowing what we do of each other, it were impossible, even were we to abandon a court life, fly away to a distance, and bury ourselves in some complete solitude, it would be impossible, I say, for us to experience that full measure of affection which must be unalloyed and uncontaminated in order to be complete. In this hour when our natures have melted beneath the influence of those better feelings which are not altogether extinct within us, we experience a revival of all the first freshness of our love, but this would not last. That moral purity which is love's vital and sustaining power exists not in our case, and in a short time, when this transitory tenderness had passed away and our minds had recovered their wonted tone, we should blush as we looked each other in the face."

"Yes, 'tis too true, too true," murmured Horace, in a deep voice and with a profound mournfulness in his looks.

"Then again, I say," hurriedly continued Venetia, "let us still yield to the strong current of our destiny," and she was about to speed from the room, when, observing the bank-notes upon the table, her recollections were in an instant recalled to the origin of this singular and indeed romantic scene with her husband. "My dear Horace," she said, turning back and placing her hand upon his arm while she looked earnestly into his countenance, "you will remember all that I have told you, will you not?" and she pointed to the bank-notes.

"My God, yes!" he exclaimed, evidently still under the influence of what has been already termed the better feelings of his nature. "I would destroy myself," he added, vehemently, "sooner than be the cause of plunging you more deeply down —"

But Venetia, waiting not to hear the remainder of the sentence, sped away from the room. Hastening up to her own boudoir, she flung off her bonnet and scarf, opened her jewel-case, and carefully deposited therein the one pearl remaining upon the string. Then, seating herself at the table, she drew forth from her writing-desk a number of letters, and began reading them with earnest attention. Oh, often and often had she perused those letters before, and in some parts there were traces of tears that had fallen,

ay, and fallen thickly too, for the writing was in those places wholly obliterated. But she now read them again, because the scene with her husband had opened her mind to those tender sympathies which even the most callous natures or the most worldly dispositions must feel at times.

Yes, she read them again and again; she wept also over those letters, for this was an hour of Venetia's weakness, one of those chastening intervals which occur in the existence of every woman, no matter how lofty her ambition, how unprincipled her conduct, or how profligate her ways.

But in the midst of this occupation her confidential dependent Jessica knocked at the boudoir, and on being desired to enter, she said, " An elderly gentlewoman desires to see your ladyship immediately."

" Who is she ? What is her name? " asked Venetia, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes.

" She would not say, my lady. In fact, I do not know her, I never saw her before; and she seems a respectable kind of a person. She declares that it is most urgent business on which she desires to see your ladyship."

" Then show her up here," said Venetia, " and order dinner to be served in half an hour."

" Does your ladyship dine alone? "

" Yes, quite alone to-day, for the first time, indeed, for the last six weeks. But the prince has got a dinner-party of convivial friends and boon companions, from which ladies are excluded. However, show this female up at once."

Jessica flitted away, and during the five minutes of her absence Venetia replaced the letters in her desk, which she locked. She then looked at herself in the glass, wiped away all traces of her tears, arranged her hair, and, reseating herself, prepared to receive with composed feelings the visitress who was approaching.

Presently the door opened, and Jessica, having ushered in the " elderly gentlewoman," immediately withdrew. But instantaneously recognizing this female's countenance, Venetia gave a start as if seized with a cold shudder, and it was evidently with a sickening sensation that she exclaimed, " Ah, Mrs. Gale! "

CHAPTER IV

THE UNWELCOME VISITRESS

Yes, it was the infamous woman who kept the fashionable house of resort in Soho Square, that now stood in the presence of Venetia. Our readers will remember that we have described her as having a matronly air; indeed, she was a woman of what might be termed motherly respectability, one of those kind, good-natured souls who would not tread upon a worm, who make the kindest of aunts and the most indulgent of grandmothers, and are always distributing blankets or giving away soup-tickets amongst the poor. No wonder, then, that Jessica had taken her for " a respectable gentlewoman," while in reality beneath that pleasing demeanour was veiled a character of the most depraved and infamous description.

" Yes, my lady, it's me, Mrs. Gale," she said, in reply to Venetia's ejaculation. Then, looking back to assure herself that the door was shut, she advanced toward the brilliant Lady Sackville, observing, with a knowing look, " Ah! I am glad to see you so well off. Many and many a time have I thought of calling, both when you was at Acacia Cottage, and since you have been here at Carlton House, but somehow or another things have always happened to prevent me."

" And what has brought you here now? " asked Venetia, in a faint voice, for she could neither appear composed or dignified, nor yet assume any air of fortitude at all, in the presence of that vile old procuress.

" Why should I come, my dear lady," said Mrs. Gale, quietly depositing herself upon a chair, though uninvited, " except to have a little bit of chat and also talk about another small matter, — of which, however, more presently.

Well, what a sweet room you have got here, to be sure!" she continued, calmly gazing around her and looking, for all the world, as if she felt herself a most welcome guest. "I never did see such a beautiful boudoir in all my life, and I can tell your ladyship that I have been in a few in my time. But really one would think that you wasn't pleased to see me?"

"Yes, I am very pleased," murmured Venetia, still in a faint voice; and though she endeavoured to appear more affable toward the woman, yet for the life of her she could not.

"Then you are unwell, or you have had something to annoy you, for you certainly don't look quite the thing. And yet, dear me! you ought to be happy as the day is long. Here you are, married to a very handsome man, a lady of title, rolling in riches, riding in a carriage, living in a palace, the star of fashion, the worshipped of the aristocracy, and her favourite mistress of the prince."

"Which I suppose is pretty generally known," remarked Venetia, now growing more collected and speaking with mingled bitterness and irony.

"Yes, it's well known enough," replied Mrs. Gale, either not observing or else not choosing to observe the peculiarity of Venetia's accents, "and very proud you ought to be when you think of it. Ah! I dare say you are indeed envied enough; and as for jealousy, why, it's natural that every handsome woman about the court should be jealous of your ladyship. But it's no wonder you have risen to such a rank, and that you are able to keep it, for the very first day you and me met, you struck me as being the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in all my life. But you are really handsomer now than ever. Setting aside that little look of annoyance which you wore just now, but which seems to be passing, I declare you appear more brilliant, more magnificent, than ever."

"I thank you for these assurances," said Venetia, not altogether insensible to the tribute just paid to the grandeur of her charms.

"Ah! it would indeed have been a pity," continued Mrs. Gale, "if anything else had happened to you than what did at the time — "

"Be pleased to tell me," interrupted Venetia, hastily, "what special business has brought you hither now; for

that you have some other purpose than that of merely conversing with me, you yourself have avowed."

"Well, there is a little favour your ladyship can do me," rejoined Mrs. Gale, with her blandest tone and her most motherly looks.

"Ah! favour — favour," muttered Venetia, impatiently, between her pearly teeth. "No one ever comes near me except to ask a favour or extort money."

"And your ladyship, being so kind, so good, and so amiable," added Mrs. Gale, who had caught every word thus uttered, but did not choose to take offence at the meaning of the sentence, "never refuses anybody. I know your ladyship does not. The very newspapers speak of your generosity, your charity, your benevolence."

"Yes, but it is not charity which you, Mrs. Gale, can possibly seek at my hands," said Venetia.

"Well, I don't know that it's exactly charity, but I am in a terrible mess of troubles at the present moment, and I really don't know how to get myself out of them. Your ladyship has no doubt read the account of that rascal Emmerson, who was executed on Monday?"

"Yes. But what of him?"

"Why, between you and me and the post," returned Mrs. Gale, "he was accustomed to use my house, especially with that Lady Curzon, whose death at Geneva has lately been in all the papers. No doubt your ladyship has seen that, too?"

"Yes, I have read the whole of that tragedy of horrors," answered Venetia, quickly. "But proceed."

"Speaking of this tragedy, is it not a dreadful thing?" said Mrs. Gale, who was apt to be garrulous. "Why, of all the names figuring in that strange story, I know several; and now that they are dead and gone, there is no harm in speaking of them. But if they were alive, not a word about their doings would issue from my lips. Discretion, — there is nothing like discretion. That's my motto. But however, as I was saying, I knew several of them. Malpas was at one time constantly at my house along with Lady Curzon, and afterward she used to come with Emmerson, and then — But, 'pon my word, I beg your ladyship's pardon," exclaimed the woman, who really had forgotten all about the intrigue of the deceased countess with Lady Sackville's husband

and the scandal which the discovery thereof had created at the time. " It didn't strike me at the moment what delicate ground I was treading on. However, these things do happen in fashionable life, and so I dare say your ladyship has taken it cool enough about your husband. But, as I was saying, I have had Malpas and Lady Curzon in my house, and I also had the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott one night at my house. Ah! I dare say she thought at the time that I didn't know her, but I did, though. I had seen her in attendance upon the queen at Windsor Castle."

" Do you mean to tell me that you have ever been inside Windsor Castle? " asked Venetia, evidently suspecting that the woman was indulging in a mere idle piece of bravado.

" Ay, that I have, more than once," she confidently rejoined, " and have acted as midwife there, too. But of that no matter. Few people know better than I do that a court is not the centre of virtue, and that ladies in waiting and women of the bedchamber may now and then have a child, though perhaps their husbands have been absent as governors of colonies or generals of armies for two or three years. Besides which, though a lady may be a maid of honour by title, it doesn't follow she should be so in fact; and let me assure you, also," added Mrs. Gale, significantly, as if she could tell more if she chose, " that the royal princesses are not the most virtuous ladies in existence."

" So I have heard," remarked Venetia, unwillingly suffering herself to be interested in this conversation; but suddenly recollecting the infamous character of the woman whom she was thus encouraging in her tittle-tattle, and also remembering that time was passing away and that her dinner-hour approached, she said, " But pray come to the point, Mrs. Gale. You began by speaking to me about the forger Emmerson."

" Ah, the villain! " ejaculated the dame. " As I told your ladyship just now, he used to frequent my house, and paid so liberally that I had the highest opinion of him. Besides, to tell you the truth, on two or three occasions when he was there with Lady Curzon, I happened to overhear them chatting together."

" In plain terms, you listened, I suppose? " said Venetia, scarcely able to conceal her disgust for the woman or her impatience at her garrulity.

"Well, well, I suppose it was so," replied Mrs. Gale, laughing. "But, sure enough, I heard Emmerson talking about writing her ladyship cheques for thousands of pounds, and so I had the highest opinion of my customer. Thinking that I should like to lay out some money at good interest, I one evening spoke to Mr. Emmerson on the matter, and he told me to come and see him upon the business at his office. So I paid him a visit accordingly, and put a couple of thousand pounds into his hands. Soon afterward he told me that he had an opportunity of laying out three thousand more to the greatest advantage, and I was fool enough to nibble at the bait. Well, my dear lady, to make a long story short — "

"Yes, do for Heaven's sake!" interjected Venetia.

"I will," answered Mrs. Gale. "I have lost, then, better than five thousand pounds by that Emmerson, and it's a very cruel thing to lose one's hard earnings in that manner," added the woman, shaking her head with as much solemn mournfulness as if it were the produce of the most honourable industry instead of the wages of iniquity that she was thus deploring.

"Pray go on. Wherefore do you come to me? The loss you speak of can have scarcely impoverished you," observed Venetia.

"Yes, but it has put me to very great inconvenience," returned Mrs. Gale, "because I have a certain sum to pay to-morrow by twelve o'clock for a renewal of the lease of my house in Soho Square, and what little money I have got left is so locked up that I really can't touch it. If I don't pay the lawyers to-morrow by twelve o'clock, I lose the lease; and you, my dear Lady Sackville, who have seen my establishment and know how beautifully fitted up it is, must be aware how dreadfully inconvenient it would be to have to turn out and get another, besides the loss of custom in the meantime. So I thought that if you would accommodate me with a couple of thousand pounds — "

"I!" ejaculated Venetia, in mingled astonishment and indignation. "I accommodate you with such an amount!"

"Yes, you," rejoined the woman, all in a moment assuming the insolent look and dogged manner of an extortioner resolute in bleeding a victim.

"What, this impertinence to me?" exclaimed Venetia,

her eyes flashing fire as she started from her seat. "How dare you force your way into my presence for such a purpose as this?"

"Because might makes right," answered Mrs. Gale, with an impudent leer, all the benevolence of her manner having become changed into a coarse, brutal, dogged air.

"Might against right!" ejaculated Venetia, scornfully. "What mean you?"

"I mean that your ladyship is completely in my power," returned Mrs. Gale. "Come, now, those eyes of yours are very handsome, but none the more so for flashing fire, and as I am very tough, I am not going to be singed by their looks. Two thousand pounds I want, and two thousand pounds I mean to have from you."

"And what if I refuse?" said Venetia, her cheeks becoming pale with rage and her lips white and quivering.

"But you don't dare refuse. One word from my lips would blast your reputation for ever."

"'Tis false, vile hag!" exclaimed Lady Sackville. "I was pure, I was virtuous —"

"Ay, but who would believe it?" cried Mrs. Gale, jeeringly. "Not a soul in the universe. Besides, whether or not —"

"This is a detestable proceeding on your part," interrupted Venetia, a prey to mingled terror and rage.

"It may be so, but I am not the less determined. You are rolling in riches, and never as yet have you given one single sixpence to the person who may be said to have been the very one that introduced you to this brilliant career, — I mean myself."

"I dare say you received your reward from others?" observed Venetia, evidently irresolute how to act.

"That has nothing to do with it," at once retorted Mrs. Gale. "The trifle I received at the time was a beggarly pittance indeed, compared with the service I have rendered you. Why, if you had any gratitude in your nature you would have made me a present the very moment you were installed in that beautiful place down at Knightsbridge. But if you didn't then, you surely ought to have thought of me when made a peeress and brought here to live in a palace."

"Well," observed Venetia, thinking it prudent to adopt

a conciliatory tone, "I will give you some proof of my gratitude on a future occasion. I am unable to do it now. So far from rolling in riches, I am actually most dreadfully embarrassed at this present moment."

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted Mrs. Gale, with coarse rudeness. "I don't believe a word of it. Besides, you sha'n't put me off with any trumpery excuses of this kind. You have already behaved ungrateful enough, and just now, if I hadn't shown a spirit, you would have had me kicked out of the place. But I wasn't to be put down by you."

"I did not intend to be uncivil," observed Venetia, showing by the increasing meekness of her manner how cruelly embarrassed she was.

"Ah! it's all very fine for you to eat humble pie now, but you wouldn't have done so if I hadn't brought you down a peg or two. Come, my lady," added the woman, with increasing insolence alike of tone and manner, "hand me over two thousand pounds to-night, or to-morrow morning I will spread it abroad all over London that the brilliant, the proud, the worshipped Lady Sackville was — "

"Hush! — enough, desist, I implore you!" cried Venetia. "Two thousand pounds! I cannot give you that sum to-night."

"But I will and must have it," said Mrs. Gale, resuming the seat from which she had risen, "and here will I remain till it is forthcoming."

"But this is the vilest, the most hideous of tyrannies," exclaimed Venetia, trembling with excitement.

"I dare say it is," rejoined the woman, who, perceiving that her triumph was sure, grew more and more resolute, insolent, and dogged.

"To-morrow, at any hour you choose to name — "

"No, I shall come here no more. To-morrow the doors would be shut in my face."

"On my honour, as a lady — "

"Enough! I will have the money to-night."

"But I have it not," cried Venetia, in a positive agony of excitement.

"Then you can get it," returned the woman, brutally.

"Here, take my jewels, anything, everything, as a guarantee that I will send you the money to redeem them."

"No, if I took them away, you would declare I had stolen them. It is useless to continue this discussion. Besides," added Mrs. Gale, vindictively, "I saw from the very first that you liked my presence as little as might be, and just now you would have turned me out if you had dared. So I choose to be revenged on you in my own way for your impudence. That's the reason which makes me so peremptory in demanding the money at once, besides my really wanting it for to-morrow, which is no lie. Let me see," she continued, looking at her watch, "it is now seven o'clock. Well, I don't mind staying here till midnight. You can in the meantime go amongst your friends and get the money."

"But you cannot possibly mean to remain here all these hours?" cried Venetia.

"I do," was the dogged response.

Lady Sackville threw herself upon the sofa in despair. What was to be done? She flung a glance at Mrs. Gale, on whose countenance sat the most determined resoluteness of purpose. Further appeal to her was all in vain. Venetia then swept her eyes around the boudoir, as if in search of something that might be suggestive of the manner in which she was to act. She felt as if she could immolate the insolent old extortioner to her rage. Ah! a sudden idea struck her, and, springing from her seat, she said, "Wait a few minutes," and hurried from the room.

Her hope was that her husband, who was to dine with the prince, might not as yet have parted with the twenty thousand pounds she had given him an hour before, in which case she would obtain of him the wherewith to satisfy Mrs. Gale. But Horace, whom she found in his dressing-room, had already sent off the money to the gambling-house keeper by Captain Tash, who was himself to form one of the royal party. Lord Sackville had therefore only five hundred pounds left, which he offered to his wife, and which she accepted. But perceiving that she was agitated, he asked her what it was that annoyed her, and for what purpose she required the money, whereupon she observed that it was merely an importunate milliner's bill which had been presented, but that the five hundred pounds would satisfy the applicant at present. She said nothing about Mrs. Gale, because, though her husband was acquainted with nearly all the circumstances of her earlier life, he was nevertheless

ignorant of that one event which had connected her at any period and even for a single day with the infamous woman. The excuse which Venetia made, as the reason for requiring the money, satisfied Horace, who was, moreover, in too great a hurry to dress, he being already late, to remain conversing unnecessarily, and Venetia sped back to the boudoir with the bank-notes for five hundred pounds crumpled up in her hand.

On again entering into the presence of Mrs. Gale, Venetia offered the money as an earnest of her good faith, but this very proceeding on her part only tended to confirm the woman's belief that she would raise heaven and earth to obtain the entire sum rather than incur the risk of the threatened exposure. Mrs. Gale accordingly refused the instalment, and reiterated her determination to abide in that boudoir until the whole sum, in good bank-notes or in gold, was placed in her hands. This decision she made known with a voice and manner still further proving how inexorable she was, and how useless it would be to argue with her.

Again, therefore, was Venetia in despair. What could she do? To leave herself at the mercy of this low, brutal woman, would be the same as suicide, for indeed, if once exposed, nought but self-destruction would remain for her. Never, never could she, the magnificent, the proud, the worshipped Venetia, endure to behold the lips of other titled dames curling with scorn, and their looks beaming with contempt upon her. Any sacrifice, yes, any, must therefore be made in order to avert the impending danger. For a moment she thought of amassing all her jewels and diamonds, and sending them by Jessica to be pledged, but she remembered that the very next day she was to entertain a select party at luncheon, and she could not possibly appear without her usual embellishments. Not that her beauty required these auxiliaries, but it was the fashion of the day which rendered a profusion of jewelry the indispensable requisite for every toilet.

What was to be done? There was one course to be adopted, and from this she recoiled with a cold shuddering. Yet where was the alternative? It were useless to apply to the prince; she knew that at the moment he was entirely without funds. She had plenty of friends to whom she could address herself, but it would be such an exposure of poverty to them, and, if the circumstance were whispered abroad, would prove

the most painful mortification. The only man of whom she could safely ask such a favour was absent from town for a few days: this was Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Therefore, having fruitlessly racked her brain for upwards of five minutes, she once more turned her looks appealingly upon Mrs. Gale, but the woman was gazing upon her in a manner which showed that she perceived how cruelly Venetia was embarrassed, and that she was actually enjoying it. Goaded therefore to desperation, and suddenly nerving herself to make that last sacrifice which was uppermost in her thoughts, and from which she had recoiled ere now with so strong a loathing, she rang the bell violently.

In a few moment Jessica made her appearance, and Venetia, in a low whisper, bade her hasten and order a hackney-coach around to the private door of the palace. The abigail, without waiting to ask a single question, but doubtless well knowing that her mistress would bestow her usual confidence on her at the first fitting opportunity, hastened to execute the order she had received. Venetia then put on a plain bonnet with a thick veil, and a dark coloured shawl. She took something from her jewel-case and hastily thrust the object into her bosom, and when her preparations were thus made, she turned toward Mrs. Gale, saying, in a low, thick voice, " I am going to a friend who resides at some distance, to procure this money. It may be two or three hours before I return."

" I have given you until midnight," answered the woman, " and here therefore shall I remain during the interval."

Venetia spoke not another word, but hastily quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER V

THE LAST PEARL

As she rolled along in the slow, lumbering hackney-coach, Lady Sackville was a prey to a variety of the most disagreeable, indeed, painful reflections. Since the month of December till the present time, it now being July, no less than ninety-nine thousand pounds had been squandered between herself and her husband. Of this enormous amount he had monopolized seventy thousand; the remainder she herself had made away with, Curzon and Malpas having received the greater portion of the sum. Now, out of the hundred thousand pounds which Lord Leveson had for his own special purposes placed at her disposal, but one thousand remained to be yet drawn.

In addition to the immense sum of ninety-nine thousand pounds thus scandalously lavished, thus infamously made away with, were to be reckoned the emoluments of Lord Sackville's office and the pecuniary presents which Venetia had received from the prince, and although the latter were not large, still they formed an item not to be omitted in a general reckoning up of all sources of revenue. As she contemplated the frightful waste of money which had thus taken place, Venetia was absolutely dismayed, and she thought to herself that if these extravagances were to continue, Heaven alone knew whence the means of ministering to them were to come. Bitterly, bitterly, did she repent having so far yielded to her husband's demands as to supply his wants so readily. Had she refused to do so, she would not at this moment be at her wits' end for a paltry fifteen hundred pounds to make up the amount demanded by the extortionate Mrs. Gale. But these are always the lessons which a reckless extravagance has to learn,

the bitter experiences which a lavish profusion is sure to reap.

On many other disagreeable things did Lady Sackville ponder as she was borne along in the hackney-coach; but when the vehicle suddenly stopped she gave a convulsive shudder, ejaculating audibly to herself, " No, no! "

Indeed, she was on the point of ordering the driver to turn back, when all the danger that she ran of again facing Mrs. Gale empty-handed presented itself vividly to her imagination, and she accordingly alighted from the hackney-coach the moment one of the Marquis of Leveson's servants, issuing forth from the hall, opened the door of the vehicle.

For it was to this nobleman's mansion that Venetia had come; but with the thick veil drawn in double folds over her face, she was not recognized by the domestics, no, nor even by his lordship's shrewd and cunning valet Brockman, as this individual escorted her up to the Crimson Drawing-room.

Venetia retained her veil over her countenance until the door again opened. Then, as the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance, little suspecting who his female visitant might be, Lady Sackville revealed her face, saying, " 'Tis I, my lord, who am come to implore your forbearance, or else to surrender at discretion."

The marquis was so taken by surprise that a dizziness seized for an instant upon his brain, and he staggered back a pace or two. But almost immediately recovering himself he took Venetia's hand, conducted her to a seat, placed himself near her, and then, gazing in mingled suspense and joy upon her countenance, he said, " Did I understand your ladyship aright, or was it only a delicious dream? "

" My lord, I am at your mercy," answered Venetia, the colour coming and going in quick transitions upon her cheeks a dozen times in a moment as she produced the string with the one remaining pearl, and handed that last representative of the hundred thousand pounds to the marquis.

" Oh, then it is no dream, it is a reality, a bright, a glorious reality," exclaimed the nobleman, his voice thrilling with exultation. " At length the moment is come when I may wind my arms around you and say, ' Venetia, you are mine! ' "

Suiting the action to the word, Lord Leveson seized Lady Sackville in his fervid embrace, and covered her lips with

kisses. She did not resist him. There was a slight recoil on her part, the recoil of an intense loathing which she experienced, but which she cared not now to display more than she could help, because the greater her repugnance the more signal his triumph. Even that slight shudder the marquis did not notice in the ardour with which he bestowed those caresses upon her. Then, unwinding his arms, he took off her bonnet, he tore away her shawl from her shoulders, and when he beheld her in the low-bodied dress which revealed not merely those full, plump shoulders in all their dazzling whiteness, but likewise all the upper part of the grand volume of the bust, he felt that the joys he was about to experience were not too dearly purchased even at the cost of one hundred thousand pounds.

Venetia still resisted him not, but she fixed her eyes upon him with a look so deprecating, so martyrized, so full of mournful entreaty, that if there had been any generosity in his nature he would have relented, yes, he would have relented; and though that splendid creature was, after all, but the courtesan of royalty, and had not a particle of virtue to lose, he would nevertheless have forborne from taking an advantage which to her had all the poignancy of a sacrifice and an immolation.

"And it is thus, Venetia," he said, gazing upon her with looks which, while gloating with a satyr's devouring lustfulness on her charms, were also filled with the radiant satisfaction of triumph, "it is thus that you have come to surrender yourself at discretion? But, my charmer, you must expect no mercy at my hands. In the warfares of love there can be no mercy shown. Inexorable have you been to all the endeavours which I have previously made to win you to my arms, and now I must prove equally inexorable toward you."

"Is it revenge, then, my lord, that you are wreaking upon me?" asked Venetia, in a low voice full of a plaintive melody, "or is it love which, after your own fashion, you mean to bestow upon me?"

"Oh, if I thought that you would be all kindness to me, then assuredly should I be all that is loving and tender and affectionate toward you. But," continued the marquis, with a slight accentuation of bitterness, "when you come to me cold as marble a statue, receiving my caresses as if you were

a being chiseled from a block of ice, allowing me to fling my arms around your neck, but not even so much as pressing my hand in return, what can I think? Why, that you have but made a convenience of the Marquis of Leveson. You accepted me as your banker, but you never, never intended that this should be the result. Even until the last day, I might even say until the last hour, — for it is but a couple of hours since you were here, — you declared, with a glorious smile of triumph upon your countenance, that the last pearl should never find its way back into my possession. Well, then, Venetia, you would have robbed — "

" Robbed, my lord? " she ejaculated, the flush of indignation mantling upon her cheeks, and the same sentiment flashing in fire from her eyes.

" Tell me candidly, Lady Sackville, had you remained at the ninety-nine thousand pounds, as you have all along intended to do," demanded the marquis, " would it not have been the cruelest, the unhandsomest, the unfairest advantage ever taken of a compact which all along could have had but one meaning, and that meaning significant enough? It would, in plain terms, have been what I denominated it, a robbery. I know not what circumstance may have transpired to compel you to pay me this second visit to-day, and to present me with the last pearl, but this I do know, — and most mortifying to my pride would it be, were it not the very symbol of my triumph, — that it is nought but some urgent necessity that has driven you to an extreme you all along intended to avoid. Here at the last, then, yes, at the very last, am I still your convenience, and in surrendering yourself under such circumstances, you have not the generosity — I will not say the gratitude — even to affect some little warmth toward the man who has made so enormous a sacrifice to obtain you."

"In this case," said Venetia, glad of an opportunity to argue the question, as it might furnish some avenue of escape, " you are influenced by revenge, and not by love, in sternly insisting upon the fulfilment of the compact this night? Ah! my lord," she continued, flinging upon him one of her most winning and seductive looks, at the same time taking his hand and seeming to play with it mechanically between both her own, " why not endeavour, by those tender assiduities which are so acceptable and so flattering unto our

sex, to win that love on my part which would render me warm, ay, even glowing and impassioned, toward you, instead of my displaying this frozen demeanour of which you complain? "

" Ah, Venetia! " cried the marquis, passing his hand over her polished shoulders, and then toying with the tresses of glossy auburn which fell upon those shoulders of alabaster polish, " I know full well all the sophistries of which your tongue is capable. But listen, I have a proposition to make to you, and if you accept it, never again will you experience the slightest embarrassment in a financial point of view."

" A proposition! " echoed Venetia, with all the eagerness of hope. " Name it, my lord, name it."

" Become my mistress altogether," replied the marquis. " Leave the prince, abandon your husband, and I will forthwith transport you to Leveson Hall in Buckinghamshire, where you shall dwell the queen of that vast domain, with a suitable revenue — "

" Oh, this is most kind, most generous, most noble on your part," exclaimed Venetia, affecting an enthusiastic gratitude. " But give me a short time to reflect upon the proposition — "

" Dearest Venetia," interrupted the marquis, at once penetrating through the perfidiousness of her intent, " you can take a day, or a week, to deliberate, if you choose."

" Ah! now indeed you overwhelm me with your generosity," cried Lady Sackville. " Give me, then, the notes for that last pearl, and lend me an additional five hundred guineas."

" Assuredly," answered the noblemen; and, producing his pocketbook, he at once drew forth the amount, which he happened to have about him.

" A thousand, thousand thanks, my dear lord," said Lady Sackville, securing the notes about her person. " Now, then," she added, rising from the sofa with an air of amiable assurance, " you will allow me to depart, and to-morrow evening I will send your lordship my decision respecting the generous, the flattering, and the tempting proposal you have made me."

" Be it so with regard to your decision, my dear Venetia," rejoined the marquis, with a look half-malicious and half-ironical, which had the effect of at once annihilating the

hope Venetia experienced, " but that can make no difference with regard to the fulfilment of our compact to-night."

Lady Sackville answered not a word. She saw at once that her duplicity was penetrated, that her artifice was seen through, and she blushed deeply with the confusion which assailed her, subduing all her wonted fortitude and rendering her powerless for the use of further argument.

" You are mine, Venetia, you are mine," resumed the marquis, throwing one arm around her neck and gazing with devouring eyes upon the features that seemed at the instant all the handsomer in the confusion of the blush which mantled on them. " Think you for a single moment that after the sacrifices I have made to obtain you I should be so contemptible an idiot, so wretched a madman, so flagrant a dolt, as to suffer any postponement of that joy which is now within my reach? I have made you a proposition, and if you like to accept it my travelling-carriage shall be ordered, and away will we speed to Leveson Hall. But if, on the other hand, you decline that proposition, or choose to defer a positive answer upon the subject, then must you be mine to-night, — mine at once."

As the marquis thus spoke, Venetia saw that his passions were kindled to an overpowering degree, and there was something hideous in that old man, so made up of artificialities as he was, now exhibiting all the gloating licentiousness of a satyr. But still she veiled as well as she was able, and with a mighty effort, the outward manifestation of her feelings, for she resolved that if she must succumb, she would not afford him reason to believe that he had consummated a mighty vengeance as well as a signal triumph.

" As I have already said, my lord," she observed, " I am at your mercy. I surrender at discretion."

" Then come this way — this way," said the marquis, in the hurry of excitement, and he led her toward the door that opened into the private suite of apartments.

" Wherefore into those rooms? " she asked, now drawing herself up with a look of haughty remonstrance.

" Not into the gallery, my dearest creature," responded the marquis, with a salacious look. " With you as my companion, there is no need for such artificial excitement as that. It is to a private chamber that we repair by this means of communication, for surely you would not wish to

pass forth from the drawing-room and across the landing outside, at the risk of being observed and recognized by any one loitering there?"

"No," interrupted Venetia, "you are right. I am prepared to accompany you," and as she thus spoke she felt so completely as a victim and a martyr that she thought within herself if ever an opportunity should arise to furnish her with the means of a bitter revenge, she would not hesitate to wreak it, for although she had received the price for the surrender of her charms, yet did she more than ever loathe, abhor, and hate the man who now insisted upon the fulfilment of the bargain.

Taking a key from his pocket, the Marquis of Leveson opened the door leading into the first room of the suite, and carrying a candle in his hand, he entered in company with Venetia. Having paused for a moment to fasten the door again, he led on into the next apartment, which, as the reader will recollect, was the one containing the mechanical chairs.

But at the very moment that he and Venetia crossed the threshold of this room, they were both smitten with amazement and dismay on beholding one of the chairs occupied by an individual whom they at once recognized to be Daniel Coffin, the Hangman.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRIVATE APARTMENTS

SINCE a very early hour in the morning had the public executioner been held a captive there, and it is probable that he would have already sunk into the stupor of exhaustion, through hunger and thirst and the fearful but unavailing struggles he had made to extricate himself, were it not that a terrible excitement kept all his vital energies in the fullest play. It is, however, impossible to conceive anything in the shape of a human countenance more hideous than his features now appeared to be. They seemed as if some goading anguish had fastened upon his very heart's core. A fierce and unnatural light, vibrating and reptile-like, shone in his eyes, indicating the feverish rage of wild and diabolic passions; his cheeks, sallow in hue, were sunken and hollow; and all the lower part of his countenance, through being unshaven, had that dark appearance which added to the savage ferocity of his mien. His hat lay upon the carpet, his hair was matted together with the perspiration that had oozed forth in the desperate but vain efforts he had made to release himself, and altogether he presented to the view as hideous and revolting a spectacle as ever wore the human shape.

He at once recognized the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Sackville. The latter he had frequently seen riding in her carriage, for be it remembered that although he had even been in her company once before, in this very same suite of rooms, — on the occasion when Sir Douglas Huntingdon had procured his attendance there, — yet Venetia had then her veil thickly folded over her face, so that the Hangman had recognized her not. But now, on this present occasion, she had no veil to conceal her features, her bonnet and shawl

had been left in the Crimson Drawing-room, and the Hangman at once perceived that it was none other than the brilliant Lady Sackville who was accompanying the Marquis of Leveson to that suite of rooms to which he would have dared conduct no lady save for the purpose of gallantry and intrigue.

As for Venetia herself, she was at once so amazed, so confounded, on beholding this dreadful man seated captive in one of the chairs, that she had no presence of mind to avert her head, much less to retreat and thus avoid recognition. A similar suspension of all the powers of volition nailed the marquis to the spot, rendering him unmindful of the fact that the honour of Venetia was suddenly compromised to a fearful extent, and, indeed, depriving him for the moment of all power to think or act.

But suddenly starting, as it were, into the keenest consciousness of her position, Venetia gave vent to a cry, and hastily retreating, threw herself upon a sofa in the first room of the suite, and out of sight of the terrible Hangman. At the same moment the Marquis of Leveson, recovering his presence of mind, advanced close up to the ruffian, saying, in a stern voice, but with a look denoting the most highly wrought curiosity, " What in Heaven's name brought you hither? "

" My own cursed folly, I should think," was Daniel Coffin's savage reply. " But come, make haste and let me loose, my lord, or, by Satan, it'll be the worse for somebody before I've done."

" Stop one moment," said the marquis. " What guarantee will you give me — But do you know that lady? "

" Bless you, I know her well enough. All the world knows her," responded the Hangman. " But it's no business of mine if she chooses to come here with your lordship. Let me loose, and that's all I care about."

" Well, but how came you here? " reiterated the marquis. " I must have an answer to that question."

" Why, in plain terms, I paid your precious niece a visit," answered Coffin, " and she, enticing me here, flung me into the chair. It is a deuced good lark — Ah! ah! " and he affected to chuckle good-humouredly, " though rather a trying condition for a fellow to be in. But, however, just let me loose."

The marquis had no inclination to prolong this interview. He was anxious to be alone again with Venetia, and he was unwilling that she should hear anything more disparaging than she already knew relative to Ernestina. He accordingly at once touched the spring which governed the hidden mechanism of the chair, and the Hangman rose slowly and painfully from his seat. But so fearfully cramped were his limbs that he fell down upon the carpet.

"Are you ill? What is the matter?" demanded Lord Leveson, seriously alarmed.

"Oh, I shall be all right in a minute or two," growled the Hangman, stretching his arms and legs as he lay with his back upon the carpet. "But it's enough to make a man feel queer after being held tight in that cursed contrivance of yours ever since about two o'clock this morning — I don't mean the middle of the day, mind, but the middle of the night."

"Have you been there so long?" said the marquis. Then, making the fellow a sign of intelligence as he caught his eye, he said, "But you need not enter into particulars now. Another time you shall tell me the whole grievance, for which I shall, however, remunerate you at once. Come, let us make a bargain."

"Oh, well, I am open to that," observed the Hangman, now slowly rising from the floor, but still with much painful difficulty. "What's the bargain about?"

"That you forget you have seen anybody here with me this evening," answered the marquis. "Will a hundred guineas seal your lips in that respect?"

"Make it two, my lord," said the Hangman, "for, by Satan! I want some good kind of grease to rub upon these cramped limbs of mine, and there's none better that I know of than money."

"Here are two bank-notes for a hundred each," said the marquis. "But now the difficulty is, how to get you out of the house."

"Not a bit," exclaimed the Hangman, sticking his hat upon his head, when he had thrust the bank-notes into his waistcoat pocket. "Just open that secret door in the wall, let me pass through the two rooms there, and when I once reach the staircase I will walk down as bold as brass. If the hall porter or any of your lordship's flunkies ask me who I am —"

" Say that you are a person been to see my valet Brockman," at once suggested the marquis.

" As good an excuse as any, I dare say," returned the Hangman. " So now good evening, my lord."

With these words Daniel Coffin made his exit by the secret door which the Marquis of Leveson had just opened, and which he immediately afterward closed again behind the departing form of the hideous ruffian. Great, too, was the relief which his lordship experienced when the Hangman was no longer in his presence, and he said to himself, " What new trouble is Ernestina involving herself in, and how on earth could this dreadful man have found either the excuse or the means to visit her? "

For a few moments the marquis was so bewildered and perplexed that he felt as if he could not settle his mind to anything until he had sought an explanation from Ernestina; but the recollection that the beautiful Venetia was close at hand speedily absorbed all other considerations, and hastening back to the adjoining room, he found her seated in an apparently half-fainting condition upon the sofa where she had thrown herself.

" Fear nothing, dearest Venetia," said the marquis, " he is gone."

" Oh, the hideous monster," murmured Lady Sackville, affecting to have experienced a far greater shock than she actually had, much though in reality she had been moved by the occurrence, but by pretending to be thus entirely overpowered, as it were, she hoped to excite the compassion of the marquis.

" I feel ill, very ill," she said, closing her eyes, and placing her hand upon her brow.

" Then I will be your nurse, charming creature," said the marquis, and he impressed a fervid kiss upon her lips.

" Oh, my lord, after such a scene as that, will you not take compassion on me? Will you show me no mercy? " she asked, in a tone of plaintive entreaty.

" Permit me, dearest, to assist you to a chamber close at hand, — that chamber," added Lord Leveson, " whither I was about to escort you just now; and there may you prove the most interesting of invalids and I the most attentive of all nurses."

" Ah! this is a cruel mockery, my lord," exclaimed Vene-

tia, slowly raising herself up into a sitting posture and bending her looks reproachfully upon the marquis.

"My sweet lady," replied the nobleman, "admitting that the surprise was great and the consternation overpowering for the moment, yet I do think that a more speedy recovery from such terror and dismay is possible on the part of a lady of your strong mind and well-toned nerves, especially as it is not the first time you have seen the public executioner; but in this very room some months back did he appear as a friend to serve your cause, which at the time was so ably championized by Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

"My lord, you are bitter and sarcastic to a degree," answered Venetia, now resuming the appearance of complete self-possession, and suddenly clothing herself with a look of calm hauteur.

"Venetia, if you have to complain of my manner or tone this evening," rejoined the marquis, "it is you who provoke every word of irony, every syllable of sarcasm, to which I may give utterance. What arts and tricks and duplicities have you not attempted within the short hour that you have been with me this evening, to escape from the fulfilment of our compact? But you accepted the bargain, and it shall be adhered to. There is no Douglas Huntingdon here to defend you now, and the very man," continued the marquis, with a malignant significancy, "who was brought as a witness in your favour, could now be produced as one against you. Ah! I behold a certain gleaming in you eye, and I understand it. You would remind me that you are acquainted with certain things — bad and derogatory enough, God knows! — about Ernestina, those things, in fact, of which Huntingdon spoke when you were here together. But you must not threaten me now, Venetia. For every word that you might utter against my niece, could I proclaim an equivalent scandal in reference to yourself. Besides, we have but one object to keep in view this evening, which is that the beautiful Lady Sackville, the favourite mistress of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, has accepted a hundred thousand pounds from the Marquis of Leveson on a certain condition."

"Which she is now here to fulfil," responded Venetia, bending a proud look upon the marquis, as if making a merit of this surrender of her charms, and even at the very last

asserting the power of one who grants a concession rather than fulfils a compact.

It wanted ten minutes of midnight when Lady Sackville alighted from a hackney-coach at the private entrance to Carlton House, and speeding up the back staircase, she reached her boudoir unobserved by a single soul.

Mrs. Gale was dozing on the sofa, the wax lights were burning on the mantel, and a tray on the table, containing sandwiches and wine, showed that Jessica had supplied refreshments during her lady's absence.

The moment Mrs. Gale heard the door open, she started up, and on beholding Lady Sackville, who, however, had the veil closely drawn down over her features, she glanced toward the timepiece on the mantel, saying, " Ah, well, your ladyship is indeed in good time. I suppose you have brought the money with you? "

" Here it is," replied Venetia, in a voice that sounded strange and hollow, and still she raised not the veil. " Take it, take it, and good night."

Mrs. Gale hastily ran her eye over the bank-notes, to assure herself that the precise sum she had demanded was there. Satisfied on this head, she put on her bonnet, and moving toward the door, said, " Well, my dear lady, I hope we are not going to part bad friends? I am sure I don't want any unpleasantness between us."

" No, there is none, there is none," interrupted Venetia, quickly, " but, for God's sake, leave me. I am tired, I am ill."

" Well, my dear, I certainly won't stay to vex you, for you have behaved well at last," and with these words Mrs. Gale took her departure.

And now, when alone, Venetia flung off her bonnet and shawl, and, wringing her hands with ineffable anguish, she gave way to the wildest ebullition of grief. No wonder was it that she had retained her veil over her features while the old procuress was still present, for she must have felt that they wore an expression of withering agony, an agony powerful enough, one would almost think, to blight and sear every lineament of that proud and brilliant beauty which had been alike her glory and her shame.

Yes, it was indeed to prevent Mrs. Gale from observing

her altered looks that Venetia had continued closely veiled until the woman took her departure; but now giving vent to the full tide of her anguish, she wrung her hands, sobbed bitterly, poured forth floods of tears, and then, burying her face in the cushions of the sofa, endeavoured to stifle the sobs and subdue the convulsive gaspings the sounds of which were too distressing even for her own ears.

CHAPTER VII

THE SUPPER DEVOURER

But Venetia was not the only lady of rank and beauty who on this memorable night experienced the lancinating influence of ineffable woe. At the very time that she was compelled to surrender herself to the embraces of the Marquis of Leveson, this nobleman's niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart, was passing through another phase in her own strange and checkered career.

The reader is already aware that Ernestina had been up the whole of the preceding night, and that during all the earlier portion of the day she was engaged at the villa at Blackheath. It was not till the afternoon that she got back to Leveson House, and then, wearied and worn out in body, and feeling as if all mental energy had abandoned her for ever, she at once sought her bedchamber and retired to rest. A profound slumber soon entranced her, and she slept on tranquilly until a late hour in the evening. When she awoke she found a maid servant seated by the bedside, and lights burning in the room.

"What o'clock it it?" asked Ernestina.

"Half-past nine, my lady," was the response. "His lordship, on hearing that your ladyship had returned and had come up to your room, felt uneasy that you did not descend again, and he accordingly sent me up to attend upon your ladyship."

"Go and procure me some refreshment," said Ernestina. Then suddenly recollecting something, she added, "Give my kind regards to my uncle, say that I feel indisposed, but that if he will step up and see me I should take it as a kindness."

The servant quitted the room, and when Ernestina was

again alone she began to deliberate with herself whether she should reveal to her uncle's ears the tremendous outrage she had experienced from Daniel Coffin, and explain the fearful nature of the punishment which she was inflicting on that man. She felt the necessity of obtaining her uncle's concurrence in this respect, so as to guard against the possibility of any one entering the secret apartments and effecting the liberation of the intended victim. But would her uncle become a party to the infliction of that frightful vengeance? Would he make himself an accomplice in the tremendous process of thus killing a human being by inches within the walls of that house? That was the question. But still, when Ernestina passed in review all the arguments for or against the probable result, she came to the conclusion that her uncle would assist her in avenging so terrific an outrage and leaving the Hangman to his fate. Indeed, it would be impossible to permit so desperate a man to go forth into the world again as her implacable and unrelenting enemy.

Such were Ernestina's reflections during the maid servant's temporary absence from the room, and the result was a determination to tell her uncle everything. But when the domestic reappeared, bearing a tray containing refreshments, Ernestina was informed that the Marquis of Leveson had gone out suddenly and unexpectedly at about seven o'clock and had not yet returned.

The real truth was that the faithful valet Brockman, knowing his lordship to be engaged in the Crimson Drawing-room, or elsewhere, with a lady, had purposely informed the maid servant that he had gone out, and hence the message now delivered by this female dependent to Ernestina.

"In that case," said her ladyship, "I will defer seeing my uncle till the morning. You may now retire, and I shall not need you any more this night."

When again alone, Ernestina began to reflect that, after all, it was perhaps much better her uncle was not at home. If he were, he might have objected to become an accomplice in the infliction of a slow, lingering, and terrible death upon Coffin; he might have insisted on liberating the wretch at all hazards and at any risks.

"But since he has gone out," thought Ernestina, continuing her musings as she sat up in bed to partake of the refreshments which had been brought, "it is most likely he will

spend the entire evening away from home, and not return till a late hour. That he will visit his private suite of apartments to-night is therefore by no means probable, and when to-morrow comes it is to be hoped that the agonies of thirst, the pangs of hunger, and the exhausting efforts of maddened attempts to escape will have consummated the work of death. But when once the deed is done and the wretch shall be no more, my uncle must adopt some means to dispose of the corpse. It will be too late then for him to refuse to assent to the act or become an accessory to its perpetration, and the only thing for him to consider will be the best means of making away with all evidences of the occurrence."

In this strain did Ernestina continue to weigh the results of her vengeance in respect to the Hangman, and gradually the desire began to arise in her mind to satisfy herself that this vengeance was proceeding according to her hopes and expectations. Perhaps the object of her inveterate hatred was already dead? Who could tell how long or how short a period it might take to send a man out of existence by such a process as that? It was not so much the hunger and thirst. Those, she knew full well, might be endured for days and days; but it was the terrible nature of the captivity, the strange and horrible restriction of the person, the fearful crampings of all the limbs, and the wearing, tearing, heart-breaking efforts which a strong man was sure to make in his utter desperation to release himself, — these constituted the exhausting powers that should lead to speedy dissolution. Likely enough, then, did she deem it, that he had already ceased to exist; and the frightful outrage she had experienced made her feel a ferocious desire to gratify her vindictive rage with a view of the cold, inanimate corpse of him who had so terribly abused her. Yes, and for the same reason, too, if he were not yet dead, did her revengeful hate prompt her to go and feast her eyes upon the excruciations, the agonies, and the tortures which the wretch must be suffering.

Thus, in either case, whether he were dead or alive, did the implacability and dark ferocity of her revenge urge her to pay a visit to the room where she had left her victim. Yielding to the influence of this morbid feeling, Lady Ernestina Dysart rose from the couch, and began to put on some of her clothing. She felt refreshed by the hours of tranquil

slumber which she had enjoyed, and invigorated by the food and wine of which she had just partaken. Well fitted, then, was she for the proceedings which she proposed to undertake, but the state of her mind was very far removed from aught at all bordering upon happiness. True, she was released from the one tremendous source of alarm that for a year past had ever been menacingly imminent, namely, the tragedy of the bathroom at the Blackheath villa. But though thus relieved from a sense of danger on that head, was she not now crushed, as it were, by the consciousness of so awful a degradation that, depraved and unprincipled though she were, it was impossible for her to remain callous to that? No, she indeed felt that she was polluted beyond all purification, that she was as loathsome an object in her own esteem as if she had been dragged through the ordeal of all the lowest stews and filthiest brothels with which the metropolis abounds; and if the thought of her beauty now arose in her mind, it was only to make her shudder at the revolting recollection that every charm had been in the possession of the common hangman. Awful and hideous recollection, astounding idea, crucifying thought, enough to stun her senses with dismay, or else goad them to a rabid frenzy!

She was in the midst of resuming her apparel when her ear suddenly caught the sound of some one turning the handle of the door, and she fancied that the maid was coming back, probably to say that the Marquis of Leveson had returned. But quickly did the door open, a form passed as rapidly in, and as the door closed again and the key turned in the lock, a horrible groan came from Ernestina's tongue, and she sank down upon her knees in the presence of the Hangman.

"Ah! the tables are turned now," he said, in a tone of diabolic ferocity, while his hideous countenance glared upon the unhappy woman as if every lineament were menacing of murder.

"O God!" she said, clasping her hands in utter despair, and feeling as if the cold hand of death were already upon her.

"Ah! food, wine!" ejaculated the Hangman, suddenly catching sight of the tray upon a table close by the bed. "Just what I want!" and he was bounding with the rabid eagerness of famine toward the refreshments when, swift

as the startled deer, Ernestina sprang from her knees, swept toward the mantel, and seized the bell-rope.

But at that very instant the Hangman turned and grasped her wrist with such fearful violence that she shrieked out with the pain. Another second, and he would have been too late to prevent her from making the bell ring.

"Silence, and sit down!" he said, with tone and looks of an infernal ferocity. Then, having flung her, as it were, into a chair, he took the towels from the wash-hand-stand and bound her in such a way that she could not rise from the seat.

Ernestina struggled not, and spoke not a word. A fearful terror was upon her. She saw that the man was half-maddened, and capable of any deed of violence, even murder itself; and polluted, degraded, lost even in her own estimation as she was, yet when thus at any moment her death-blow might be dealt, the instinctive clingings to life asserted their power.

"Now you will stay there as long as I like," said the Hangman, speaking with a hyena-like ferocity. "But if you make any noise, this will soon silence you!" and as he spoke he drew forth his sharp clasp-knife, the blade of which had a horrible ghastly appearance that caused the blood to stagnate throughout the unhappy woman's entire being.

Daniel Coffin now sat down at the table, and began to eat and drink with the avidity of a wild beast. The maid servant had placed several dishes upon the tray, in order to tempt Lady Ernestina's appetite, — cold chicken, tongue, pigeon-pie, and jellies, together with sherry and port wine. As a supper there would have been sufficient for six or eight persons, but almost incredible was the inroad which Daniel Coffin made upon the viands. Dish after dish did he attack with the ravenous appetite of one who had been starving for whole days. The cold fowl was picked to the very bones, and even some of these did he crunch and swallow during the devouring process. Of the tongue, which was nearly entire when he thrust his fork into it, did he leave but a few pieces of the fat and tough portions of the root; and as for the pigeon-pie, it disappeared with a proportionate rapidity. This tremendous supper he washed down with the wine, which he drank out of a tumbler, just as if it were mere

water or malt liquor that he thus poured down his capacious throat; and the repast was wound up with the jellies, all of which he disposed of in half a dozen twinklings of the eye.

While the Hangman was engaged in his monster repast, Lady Ernestina Dysart endeavoured to collect her ideas and look her altered position in the face. But this she could not do steadily and deliberately. It was impossible for her to reason with calmness in the presence of this fearful calamity which had overtaken her. Turned indeed were the tables now. There sat the Hangman, her master, having full power of life and death over her, and here was she bound captive and helpless in a chair. What would he do with her? What course did he mean to adopt? What horrors would the implacability of his vengeance suggest? In a word, what was to be her fate? She knew not; and how, in the midst of those icelike shudderings and freezing tremors which passed over her, could she possibly settle her thoughts so as to frame a conjecture upon the awful subject?

"There, that will do for once," said the Hangman, pushing away his plate. Then, as he poured the remains of the wine into the tumbler and surveyed with a grim complacency the various dishes he had emptied, he observed, "This supper is certainly a trifle of compensation for upwards of twenty hours' captivity in that cursed chair, and considering that I hadn't eaten anything since nine o'clock last evening, my fast may be reckoned for at least twenty-five hours."

He then poured the remainder of the wine down his throat, and after smacking his lips, fixed his eyes upon Ernestina.

"Well, and what do you think of yourself now," he continued, "after playing me such a pretty trick? By Jove! it is enough to make one stark, staring mad to think of it. But how do you suppose I got loose?" he demanded, with an ironical grin. "The vices of you aristocrats are often nuts for me to crack somehow or another. To tell the truth, I had pretty well given up all hope, when, lo and behold! the door opens, a light shines in, and who the deuce should make their appearance but your precious uncle and Lady Sackville."

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina, amazement for the moment rising above her terror. "My uncle and Venetia?"

"Ay, that it was," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "What scandalous reprobates you women of quality

are, to be sure! However, a capital thing it was for me that this should have happened to-night, for I do believe I should have been dead before morning. Now, so far from dying or any chance of it, I am in the best possible feather, — two hundred pounds in my pocket, a good supper and a couple of bottles of wine under my waistcoat, and one of the handsomest women of the aristocracy for my mistress."

Ernestina gave a sudden start and a faint cry as these last words, so full of terrible menace, smote her ears; but feeling the next instant how utterly powerless she was, she sank back in the chair with a low, deep moan, and her head fell forward upon the luxuriant volume of her naked bosom.

" It's above an hour and a half ago that I was let loose from that cursed chair," resumed the Hangman, " and I meant to come straight up to this room at once, but I heard some one about on the stairs, so I just slipped into another chamber, the first that was handy, and, locking myself in, laid down on the bed a bit, for I was regularly tired out. However, when I had done my nap, I found my way to your room, and here I am safe and sound. But I suppose," he added, with another grin and ironical leer, " you can't guess why I am sitting here chattering to you in this familiar style? In the first place, it's because this wine has put me into a little better humour than I was just now; and, in the second place, because you are my mistress, and so I want to put ourselves on an intimate and comfortable footing together."

Ernestina's countenance grew haggard and ghastly to a degree as the public executioner thus spoke; and as she raised her eyes in mingled entreaty, horror, and uncertainty toward him, all the intensity of her varied feelings was depicted with a frightful eloquence in her looks.

" Well, and what are you thinking of, then? " he demanded, with brutal abruptness. " You must not give way to regret and so on, or else it will spoil your beauty. And mind, yours is a beauty of which I shall be very proud when I introduce you to all my particular friends."

" Eternal God! " shrieked Lady Ernestina, suddenly shaking herself in a paroxysm of hysterical frenzy, " is it possible that all this can be true, that I hear aright? "

" True? Of course it is. Why the devil shouldn't it be? But come, I will give you a proof of my love and affection."

Thus speaking, and with a horrible chuckling laugh, the

Hangman, who was somewhat under the influence of the two bottles of wine which he had drunk, rose from his chair, accosted Ernestina, and stooping down, began covering her face with kisses. She struggled, O heavens! she struggled as if it were a huge boa-constrictor that was thus slobbering her with its forked tongue previous to the process of deglutition; but she was so bound in the chair and her arms were secured in such a manner that she could afford no effectual resistance, and as to screaming out, her powers of utterance were either absorbed in the horror of her feelings, or else the few stifled cries which might perhaps have found vent were kept down by the brutal kisses of the monster.

"Now, don't you think I am an affectionate kind of fellow?" he asked. "But come, it's time we should be off," and with these words he loosened the towels which held her ladyship in the chair.

Panting and gasping from the half-smothering effects of the caresses he had bestowed upon her, and with a deep inward sense of self-loathing, wretched, too, oh, wretched beyond all possibility of description, Ernestina had scarcely consciousness or energy left to think at all. But when the ruffian bade her rise, with an intimation that she was to depart in his company, she looked up into his face in a manner of anxious inquiry.

"Well, I suppose I spoke intelligibly enough," he growlingly observed, "and if not, I can soon make you understand. You are going away with me to be my mistress, to live with me, — no, not exactly to live with me, 'cause why, it wouldn't do to take you to the same house where Sally Melmoth is. But I will put you into a nice comfortable lodging over in Bermondsey."

"Monster, wretch, villain!" exclaimed Ernestina, now starting from the chair to which she was no longer bound, "let this scene end at once."

"Well, then, it will end in this manner," cried the Hangman, snatching up his clasp-knife from the table and raising the ghastly, gleaming blade above Ernestina's head.

"Mercy, mercy!" she ejaculated, falling upon her knees, for there was something frightful in the aspect of that hideous knife.

"Now listen, while I say just a few last words," exclaimed Coffin.

"Last words?" repeated Ernestina, trembling all over as she knelt before him, for it struck her that this phrase was indicative of her doom.

"You are a fool. I don't want to hurt you, unless you make me," resumed the Hangman. "But what I mean to say is just simply this. Twice have you done your best to make an end of me, once when you thought you was sticking a dagger into me on Westminster Bridge, and last night, or, rather, this morning, when you shoved me into the chair. If I didn't mean to be revenged, I shouldn't be flesh and blood. But I do mean revenge, and that is by making you my mistress. Or else I will send every inch of this blade through that lovely bosom of yours, down into your very heart. So now decide."

Ernestina remained upon her knees, but with her hands no longer outstretched or her looks upraised. Her arms fell before her, and her head drooped on her bosom, giving her the air of a kneeling penitent. She was abandoning herself to despair, the stupor of dismay was coming over her; her ideas were growing confused, her senses seemed to be leaving her.

"Now, then, get up, dress yourself, and let us depart," said the Hangman.

But no response was given him, and the unhappy lady, already upon her knees, fell with her face downward upon the floor, where she lay senseless.

When she awoke to consciousness again, she was lying on the bed, and the Hangman was sprinkling water on her face. A conviction that she had experienced fresh outrage struck her as if with a death-blow.

"You are killing me, I am dying," she murmured, in a faint voice, but still there was an expression of ineffable horror in her looks as she averted them from the Hangman's countenance.

"Oh, that's all nonsense," he exclaimed. "Women don't die like this. Besides, you are young and strong and healthy enough. If it was the prince that was with you, you wouldn't be dying with anything, unless it was pleasure, but because a genelman of my profession has took a fancy to you —"

"Oh, if you have any compassion left, if you have any feeling in your heart," moaned the wretched Ernestina, "leave me. I am dying."

The Hangman grew frightened. Even while Ernestina was giving faint and feeble utterance to these last words, he was struck by the visible change which had come over her, and there was also something that alarmed him in the tone of her voice. Yet he was undecided how to act. To leave her then and there was to abandon the vengeance which he had resolved to wreak, and how could he give up all idea of revenge for what he considered to be the wrongs he had experienced? That he was already sufficiently avenged by the brutal outrages perpetrated on the unhappy lady, he did not think. He sought to drag her through all the mire, pollution, and filth of a brothel in Bermondsey, for it was only by the consummate degradation of the high-born, titled, and beautiful lady that his fiendish malice and diabolic vindictiveness could be appeased.

While he was standing by the side of the couch, uncertain how to act, Ernestina had averted her countenance, and shading her eyes with one of her white hands, she lay as if in extremities, her breath coming with quick, uneasy gaspings, and all the lower part of her countenance looking as if the seal of death were already impressed upon it.

"Come, now, what does this mean?" demanded the Hangman, gruffly, endeavouring, as it were, to conceal his fears even from himself beneath a display of his savage temper. "What's the matter with you?"

"I tell you I am dying," answered Ernestina, in a voice that was scarcely audible. "Heavens! will you not suffer me to die in peace?"

Daniel Coffin was now too seriously alarmed to permit him to remain undecided any longer; and thinking that the best course he could adopt would be to take his departure as promptly as possible, he without another word snatched up his hat, flung it upon his head, and stole forth from the room. Descending the stairs, he boldly traversed the hall, and the moment the porter emerged from his great leathern sentry-box in which he was wont to sit and doze, Coffin said, "I'm a friend of Mr. Brockman's."

The porter recollected having seen the Hangman before, but still he could not help gazing suspiciously upon him. Coffin accordingly drew the crowbar out of his pocket, and gave the domestic a tap on the head which at once stretched him senseless on the marble floor of the hall.

The Hangman escaped from the house without any further molestation, and several minutes elapsed before the hall porter came to himself. He then raised an alarm that some robber had been in the house, and as the servants rushed about in all directions, the maid appointed to wait on Ernestina sped to her room. There she found her ladyship dangerously ill; but nothing could equal the young woman's amazement when she beheld the dishes completely cleared and the decanters emptied.

" Heavens! the robbers have been here! " she exclaimed, in surprise and alarm.

Lady Ernestina Dysart, now recovering partially, and perceiving the necessity of telling some tale, at once corroborated the maid's belief, representing that she had fallen into a swoon on discovering a robber in her room, and that she was only now beginning to shake off the effects of the terrific fright she had sustained.

In this manner was not only the absence of the supper accounted for, but likewise the serious illness which Lady Ernestina experienced.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION OF THE HISTORY OF SELLIS

THE scene shifts once more to Windsor Castle, and it is the same evening of which we have been writing.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Bredalbane, occupying the post of one of the royal bedchamber women, and if we peep into this lady's own room in the castellated palace, at about ten o'clock, we shall find her seated *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Arbuthnot, who held a similar appointment. These two ladies had become great friends and confidantes, and when not required to be in personal attendance on the queen, they were wont to have a cup of tea or a pleasant little supper together, in order to discuss all the scandal of the palace.

On the present occasion they were seated at the supper-table. The repast was over, but they were enjoying themselves with a glass of liqueur, while indulging in some of their favourite topics of discourse.

"Yes, my dear friend," said Mrs. Bredalbane, pursuing the thread of some previous remarks which she had been making, "I can assure you the princess persecutes me to death upon this subject; and that is what you beheld her talking to me so earnestly about in the park this morning."

"But how is it," inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that her Royal Highness should be so anxious to learn the history of Sellis's mysterious death?"

"You might say murder, if you chose," observed Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Indeed! are you so positive on that head?" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I am," was the response. "Of all the topics whereon

you and I have so frequently conversed, I do believe that the Sellis business is the only one left untouched by us — "

" And it is precisely that which has suddenly assumed an important degree of interest in my eyes," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, " after what you have told me relative to the young Princess Charlotte. But how came her Royal Highness to be aware that you, of all the ladies at court, were better instructed in this mysterious transaction than any one else? "

" I will tell you how it happened," said Mrs. Bredalbane. " Poor dear Lady Prescott, whose melancholy death at Geneva has so recently appeared in the papers, was a bosom friend of mine, and one evening we were talking familiarly together, in the same way as you and I at the present moment. The conversation turned upon the Sellis affair, and I was induced to commence the narrative of the dread occurrence. Little suspecting who overheard me, I had nearly finished the recital, when all of a sudden the astounding fact became revealed to us that the Princess Charlotte was a listener; and, as she subsequently confessed, she had caught every syllable, — that is to say, as far as I had advanced in the narrative."

" Dear me, how very awkward! " exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. " Was that long ago? "

" Yes, some months, just before Lady Prescott resigned and was succeeded by you. From that moment has the princess constantly plagued and persecuted me to tell her the remainder of the narrative, but it is of a nature which, strictly speaking, cannot possibly be revealed to so young a person."

" Is it, then, of so very peculiar a character? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a display of curiosity that was significant enough.

" Ah! my dear friend, if you only heard it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, " you would indeed agree with me that I cannot, must not, dare not comply with the young princess's request. I have accordingly managed to put her off from time to time with a variety of excuses, but this morning she told me frankly enough she did not think that I intended to fulfil my promise at all. That was when you saw her looking so cross, firing up, indeed, in her truly royal manner," added Mrs. Bredalbane, whose head was filled

with courtly ideas to which her tongue could only give utterance in a courtly sense. "But, after all, she is a sweet, good-natured princess, and if she were not a princess, we should speak of her as a most amiable creature."

"But this story of Sellis?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Come, my dear friend, I do not suppose that you have any reserve with me?"

"Very far from it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "It would indeed be very wrong of me to keep any secrets from you, after the implicit confidence which you have placed in me. Not but that I should have penetrated the intimacy subsisting between your charming daughter Penelope and the prince, even if you had not whispered in my ear that such an intimacy did really exist. But if Penelope should prove in the family way, as you fear — "

"Fear is not perhaps exactly the word, my good friend," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "because the existence of issue from this amour would always prove a sort of tie — You understand me?" she observed, significantly.

"Without a doubt," answered Mrs. Bredalbane, "and I do not know which to admire the most, the truly woman of the world way in which you take your daughter's connection with the prince, or the precision with which you estimate the results. Ah! my dear friend, I have seen so many, many strange things within these walls. But, while I think of it, let me observe that if Penelope should prove with child, I can recommend an excellent and trustworthy female, at whose house she can go into retirement — "

"A thousand thanks for the interest you take in the matter," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But pray do let me bring back your attention to that topic which for the present moment has an absorbing interest for me, — I mean the affair of Sellis."

"Well, then, I will give you that narrative," answered Mrs. Bredalbane. "You are well aware that the transaction took place during the night between the 31st of May and the 1st of June, 1810, therefore upwards of five years ago. The Duke of Cumberland was then living, as he is now, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. He had three valets, Neale, Sellis, and Joux. The first-mentioned was an Englishman, the second an Italian, and the third a Frenchman. Neale was a very ordinary-looking person; Sellis was a

dark-complexioned and rather handsome man; Joux was thin and pale-faced, neatly made, and admirably fitted for a valet. Sellis was an excellent man, quiet, but cheerful, by no means forward in his manners, never excited nor yet dispirited, but always preserving an equanimity of temper. He was married and had four children, his family being accommodated with lodgings over the gateway leading from Cleveland Row into the Kitchen Court. He had also his own room in the close vicinage of the duke's suite of apartments, and, if you can understand me, there was a passage leading from this room to the duke's bedchamber, and another passage leading into the lodgings over the gateway. Adjoining the duke's room was the one occupied by Neale when on duty."

"I understand perfectly," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Pray proceed."

"It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the 31st of May," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that Sellis repaired to Neale's room for the purpose of saying something to him. They were accustomed, with the familiarity usually subsisting between dependents in the same household, to enter each other's rooms at any time without the ceremony of knocking; and therefore on this occasion of which I am speaking, Sellis entered Neale's apartment without any warning. But he at once beheld something which made him start back in dismay, and give vent to the exclamation of 'Heavens! the Princess Augusta!' Flying along the passage, back to his own room, Sellis ran against Joux, who happened to be there at the moment and who heard with much astonishment the singular ejaculation which burst from his lips. He was equally surprised at Sellis's hasty and confused manner, and the more so when with a strange wildness of look he said to him, 'You cannot possibly go to Neale's room, for he is engaged.' He then took Joux along with him into his lodgings, and kept him in conversation for about an hour. Joux then retired, naturally wondering at the incident which I have described, but of which Sellis volunteered not the least explanation, nor even alluded to it in the presence of his wife. As one of Sellis's children was ill and it was arranged that the little invalid should sleep with its mother, Sellis had decided upon passing the night in his own room belonging to the ducal suite of apartments. Accordingly, at ten o'clock

on that memorable night, he embraced his wife and children with his wonted affection, and then retired to his chamber."

The Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane paused for a few moments to replenish her glass of liqueur, an example which Mrs. Arbuthnot readily followed, and this being done, the former lady resumed her narrative in the ensuing terms:

"It was half-past two in the morning, when the cry of murder rang through that portion of St. James's Palace. All was speedily confusion and alarm. The Duke of Cumberland was in his nightshirt, covered with blood, Neale was with him, and in a very short time all the domestics were aroused from their beds. Joux was one of the first to speed to the duke's chamber, and it was he who was also the first to discover that Sellis was no more. It appears that on hastening to call the Italian, Joux was horror-stricken on finding the unfortunate man lying on the bed with his throat cut from ear to ear, — indeed, in so horrible a manner that his head was all but severed from his body. Advancing nearer to the couch, Joux presently observed a sheet of paper lying on the floor. It was a partially finished letter, in the handwriting of Sellis, and being in the shade of a chest of drawers, from which it had evidently fallen, it might easily have escaped the superficial notice of any one entering that room. Indeed, Joux himself had not remarked it until looking more attentively about the scene of horror, so that it is not to be wondered at if it failed to catch the eyes of the murderer in the hurry, confusion, and excitement necessarily attendant on the perpetration of so appalling a crime. Joux hastily ran his eye over the first few lines, and these were to him a sudden revelation. He understood it all, but finding himself thus in a single moment the possessor of a fearful secret, he felt an unknown terror come over him. It seemed as if a warning voice whispered in his ear, 'Take heed lest you share the same fate!' For he saw in an instant that Sellis had been murdered on account of this same secret which had just come into his possession; and as he beheld the awful spectacle of the butchered Italian stretched before him, an ice-chill struck to his heart with a presentiment of what his own doom might be. Hastily thrusting, therefore, the letter into his pocket, he was induced by his terrors to place a seal upon his lips. You may rest assured that he sought the earliest opportunity to lock himself up in his own

room and read the letter which accident had placed in his possession. I will now show you that document itself."

"What, the very letter!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, in astonishment. "Is it in your possession?"

"It is," was the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane's reply. Then rising from her seat, she fetched her writing-desk from a side-table, and producing a number of papers, searched amongst them for the required document.

This she soon found, and taking it from the envelope in which it was carefully preserved, she handed it to Mrs. Arbuthnot. The writing was in the peculiar cramped hand characterizing foreign penmanship. The lines had evidently been traced under circumstances of considerable excitement, and there was every sign to prove that the letter was merely a draught whence a fair copy was to be made, as there were many erasures, corrections, and interlineations. Indeed, it was by no means an easy task to decipher the writing at all, but at length, with Mrs. Bredalbane's assistance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was enabled to make out the contents in the following manner:

"For my own sake, I must declare that it was through no motive of impertinent curiosity I entered the room just now. Indeed, I had not a suspicion that aught of evil was going on. But, heavens! what did I behold? Yourself and the Princess Augusta in each other's arms, leaving not a doubt as to the criminality of the scene. I am amazed, astounded, horrified. I know not what to do. Without any affectation of sickly sentimentalism, I may be permitted to declare myself a lover of virtue. At all events, my ideas of propriety are such that I have experienced a shock which will never be forgotten. I have dissembled my feelings in the presence of my wife, in the presence of Joux also. I have endeavoured to be calm, but it was the external surface of the volcano, while the fire was agitating within. I am incapable of concealing the true state of my feelings much longer. Henceforth, whenever I might see you, whenever I might behold the Princess Augusta, and whenever, too, I might hear your names mentioned, my countenance would betray the fact that in the deep caverns of my soul a dread secret was deposited. If questioned, especially if pressed by my wife, what could I say? Subterfuge, falsehood — no, no! I hate untruth. Besides, I could not make all the rest of my

life one continuous incessant lie, for the sake of veiling this hideous secret which personally concerns me not. What, then, is to be done? I assuredly do not ever wish to be dragged into a revelation, nor yet be surprised into a betrayal, of this tremendous secret. My only course is to leave St. James's, to seek some other service, and by being thus removed from the presence of those whom this secret so nearly concerns, I may not be forced every day and every hour to find myself blushing or turning pale, and having to invent some falsehood as an excuse for my emotions.

" My mind, therefore, is made up. I shall leave to-morrow. My child's illness will serve as an excuse. The doctor said something to-day about the seaside. This, then, will serve to account for my sudden resolve, a resolve which is now unchangeable.

" If I write to you thus, addressing you by no name, it is that I cannot bring myself to pay even the most ordinary courtesy to one who . . . "

Here the letter abruptly broke off, but it was evident that, so much as there was of it, its contents had produced a deep impression upon Mrs. Arbuthnot's mind.

" What think you of that document? " asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

" Before I offer a single comment," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, " be pleased to finish your narrative," and as she thus spoke, her manner was grave and her look serious to a degree.

" I have but little more to say," continued the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane. " You may readily suppose that Joux, on perusing this letter, was strangely excited, and if, on the spur of the moment, he had deemed it prudent to abstain from declaring what he knew or producing the document, he was now more than ever confirmed in the adoption of that course. The inquest took place, and, as a matter of course, the evidence, such as it was, had been cooked up so as to have but one tendency, namely, to fix the stigma of self-destruction upon Sellis. A verdict was returned accordingly, and the unfortunate Italian was not only branded as a base, cowardly assassin, the midnight assailant of a kind and benevolent master, but also as a miserable suicide."

" And what about Joux? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

" He managed to keep himself out of the way at the

moment when the evidence of the domestics and others was being taken down in writing, to be ultimately submitted to the coroner's jury, and soon afterward he quitted the service of his Royal Highness. He then entered my household as butler, my husband being at that time alive and our residence in Mount Street. In the course of a short time I observed that Joux had evidently something on his mind, and knowing, of course, that he had been in the service of the Duke of Cumberland, I fancied that he might have picked up some piece of court scandal, or have become a party in some not overnice transaction connected with high life. To these suppositions I was led by a word or two which at times he inadvertently dropped, and at length I pressed him on the subject. He then told me all these particulars relative to Sellis and the letter which I have been describing to you, and which have never been made public. He gave me the letter. He even appeared delighted to get rid of it, and yet he assured me that some superstitious feeling had always prevented him from destroying it whenever he entertained the idea. He left me at length to 'better himself,' as the phrase goes, and I know not what has become of him."

"But what was his opinion relative to the whole affair?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, fixing upon her friend a keen and searching look.

"What could he think, otherwise than that Sellis had discovered an amorous intrigue existing between the Princess Augusta and the valet Neale, and that, fearful of being betrayed and ruined, Neale murdered Sellis, and then, in order to shield himself, penetrated into the Duke of Cumberland's room, wounded his Royal Highness, and fled, of course leaving it to be supposed that Sellis was the assailant."

"And you believe all this relative to Neale?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"To be sure I do," replied Mrs. Bredalbane. "Surely you do not fancy that Joux forged this letter, and that, his whole story a fiction, Sellis was really an intended robber and murderer and an actual suicide?"

"No, I believe every syllable of the story told by Joux," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I also feel convinced that this letter is genuine, though without signature, imperfect, and unfinished. I therefore believe that Sellis was murdered, but I do not believe that Neale was the murderer."

" Good heavens! what do you believe? " exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, with a frightened regard.

" Tell me what was the impression that Joux entertained on the subject? " inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot.

" I do not remember that he ever specifically and in so many words explained his opinion," said Mrs. Bredalbane. " He told me the narrative, gave me the letter, and suffered me to draw my own inference, which I did, supposing it to be the same that he himself had already deduced from the facts themselves."

" Depend upon it," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, shaking her head solemnly, " that the impression Joux formed was very different from the one which you, my dear friend, received."

" Good heavens! I begin to entertain a dreadful suspicion," cried Mrs. Bredalbane.

" And my wonder is that you did not entertain it long ago," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. " Look calmly and dispassionately at all the facts. Why was Joux so overpowered with alarm on discovering the secret? Because he read the frightful truth in a moment. Had he believed Neale, a humble and obscure domestic, to have been the murderer, he would not have feared to proclaim this belief. But it was because he comprehended the whole of that awful mystery — "

" For God's sake, take care of what you say! " interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, casting an anxious glance around, as if the faces of listeners might peer forth from the very walls. Then she rose and looked forth from the door, to satisfy herself that there were no eavesdroppers.

" It is impossible," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, when Mrs. Bredalbane had resumed her seat, " to shut one's eyes against the truth, startling, horrifying, and astounding though it be, which stands forth patent and visible from amidst all the facts before us. The belief that Neale was the murderer involves the clumsiest theory. How could he be ruined and undone because a royal lady bestowed her favours on him? Would she not screen him? Would she not provide for him? Where was the necessity to murder Sellis? Think you that the princess herself would have counselled him to the deed? And then, if your theory makes him the murderer of Sellis, it must make him also the assail-

ant of the duke. But why suppose him committing one unnecessary crime in order to veil another? It would have been an act of sheer madness on Neale's part, and the theory is not tenable for a moment."

"Then who — who —" asked Mrs. Bredalbane, scarcely daring to allow her lips to form the query which all her suspicions now naturally suggested.

"My dear friend, between you and me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "there is not the slightest necessity to mince matters. We are alone, we shall not betray each other, and we may therefore speak without reserve. This, then, is my opinion, my firm opinion, the opinion to which I came while reading Sellis's letter."

"And that opionion?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Is that Ernest, Duke of Cumberland, was guilty of incest with his sister, the Princess Augusta, and was himself the murderer of Sellis."

Such was the answer that Mrs. Arbuthnot gave in a firm and solemn voice, and then a long pause ensued.

"Yes, it must be so," said Mrs. Bredalbane, at length breaking silence and speaking in a musing tone. "I comprehend it all now. That letter was intended to have been sent to the Duke of Cumberland, whereas until this night I have always imagined that it was meant for Neale. Poor Sellis! he must have been endowed with fine and even noble feelings indeed. That such was the case his letter fully proves."

"And in imagination," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "one may penetrate into the solitude of his chamber on that fearful night. I fancy that I can see him, carried along by a torrent of irresistible feelings excited by the fearful crime of incest which he had witnessed, taking up his pen to give expression to those feelings in a letter to his royal master, that master whom he evidently considered to have forfeited all claim to respect and deference. Then may we imagine him throwing down his pen, perhaps even tossing the paper itself impatiently aside, so that it fell down in the corner where Joux picked it up, and throwing himself, half-dressed as he was, upon the bed, exhausted by the fearful excitement of his overwrought feelings. But ah! now comes the awful phase of the tremendous drama. The door opens, the Duke of Cumberland steals in, Sellis sleeps, and from

that sleep there is to be no waking. The frightful deed is done, and forth from that room goes the duke, a murderer. Ay, and what is more, too, he must have been a cold-blooded assassin, for on his return to his own room, he had the presence of mind to perform the part which was to give a colour and complexion to the whole affair, — I mean those wounds which he must have inflicted upon himself — "

" But the medical evidence," interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, " proved that the wounds were serious."

" Granting that they were," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, " may we not suppose that the duke inflicted them a little more severely than he perhaps intended? Or that, being a bold and desperate man, he calculated full well that the more severely he punished himself the more certain was he to avert suspicion from his own door? Or again, the medical evidence may have been exaggerated and overstrained."

" Is it not an awful subject? " asked Mrs. Bredalbane, as she replaced the unfinished letter of the murdered Sellis in her writing-desk.

" It is a tremendous and a fearful episode in the history of the royal family," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, " and I think that you now will be more than ever cautious how you appease the curiosity of the Princess Charlotte."

CHAPTER IX

THE DOOMED WOMAN

Return we once more to Geneva, the scene of so many and startling incidents already chronicled in our narrative.

It was ten o'clock at night when Jocelyn Loftus rang the bell at the entrance of the gloomy prison. The gate was immediately opened by the porter, who inquired his business.

"I wish to see the Englishwoman named Ranger who is to die to-morrow," was the answer given by our hero.

"It is too late, sir," replied the porter. "The prison hours — "

"Here!" said Loftus, producing a paper from his pocket. "It is an order from the syndics to admit me."

The man glanced his eye over the paper, bowed with much respect, and said, "Have the kindness, sir, to follow me."

Thus speaking, the porter conducted our hero along the gloomy passage, which was dimly lighted by an iron lamp suspended to the ceiling, and turning into another stone corridor he led him into a large room, where a turnkey, two or three of the prison watchmen, and the sergeant of the guard stationed within the walls of the establishment were lounging upon benches, smoking their pipes, and drinking the small wine of the country. The porter gave the written order to the turnkey, who forthwith took up a lantern and requested Jocelyn to accompany him. The porter returned to his lodge at the gate, and our hero followed the turnkey through the apartment into another long passage on the farther side. They then traversed a large courtyard surrounded by the lofty buildings constituting that particular division of the gaol. But in one window only did a light shine.

"That is where the three men are who are to be guillotined

to-morrow along with Mrs. Ranger," said the turnkey. "The priest is with them, for they are all three Catholics, and they are allowed a light in their cell."

"And how do they bear themselves?" asked Loftus, "for I was told yesterday that they are thoroughly reckless and impenitent."

"There!" said the turnkey, "that is a proof," and he drew Jocelyn beneath the barred window of the cell, where they both paused for a few moments.

The three men were singing, not a hymn, but a bacchanalian song; and then suddenly breaking off with a loud laugh, they began flinging taunts and ribald jests at the priest. Then arose, however, the voice of that pious man enjoining them to listen to the words he had to speak, but again they broke forth into a coarse guffaw; and Jocelyn, with a cold tremor passing throughout his frame, whispered to the turnkey, "This is horrible! For Heaven's sake let us move on."

"Think you," asked the prison functionary, as he proceeded to conduct our hero across the yard, "that those men will continue thus until the last? I do not. My experience is against such a belief."

"And I also think," answered Jocelyn, "and indeed I hope, for their own sake, that there was something false, hollow, and unnatural in their dreadful mirth. It sounded like the desperate attempt of men to drown care in a forced excitement."

"Just so," rejoined the turnkey. "But here we are, in the women's division."

While thus speaking, the prison official had opened a door leading into a second courtyard, and here also one light was alone seen shining through the window of a cell on the ground floor. The turnkey opened another door, which led into the building, and conducting our hero along a gloomy passage, where their footsteps raised echoes that had a fearful and ominous sound, he presently stopped at a door through the chinks of which a feeble glimmering shone forth.

"Do you wish to see her alone?" he asked, in a subdued whisper. "Just as you like."

"Yes, alone," replied Loftus. "Is any one with her now?"

"No; she desired the clergyman — for she has a Protes-

tant minister attending upon her — to return at midnight. I shall walk up and down in the passage until you come forth again."

Thus speaking, he drew back the bolts and unfastened the chain of the massive door; the key grated horribly in the lock, and the next moment Jocelyn passed into the cell. The door closed behind him, and he was now alone with Mrs. Ranger.

She was sitting upon the mean and sordid pallet stretched on a rough wooden bedstead. A candle stood upon a small table, and its light, dim and flickering, added to the ghastliness of the wretched woman's appearance. Heavens! how altered was she! The ravages of old age had been fearfully aggravated by the corroding influences of dire anguish and ineffable horror during the last few weeks, and those ravages were no longer disguised by the abundant use of cosmetics and succedaneous artifices. No rouge or pearl-powder or refreshing lotions mitigated or disguised the hideousness of the wretched woman's countenance: her skin was like wrinkled parchment upon her fleshless cheeks; her neck was scraggy and sallow even to loathsomeness; her eyes seemed set in deep caverns. She had either lost, or else no longer chose to wear, her false teeth, and her mouth had therefore fallen in. Her nose was frightfully thin, so that her profile had all the angular sharpness of old age, unredeemed by any of that benevolent or placid expression which at such a time of life so often prevents the countenance from being revoltingly ugly. Her hair still retained the black dye wherewith she had stained it at one of the latest toilets which she performed at the villa; but inasmuch as it had grown somewhat during her imprisonment, it was all perfectly white for about a third of an inch at the roots, a circumstance that added to the hideousness of her appearance. Altogether she seemed the vilest and most loathsome wreck of humanity upon which Jocelyn Loftus ever set his eyes.

The moment he entered the cell he found her looks fixed upon him. She had been gazing at the door while it opened, and there was a species of reptile-like glistening in her sunken eyes. Loftus could not help shuddering as he thus encountered the looks of the wretched woman. When he had last seen her, it was a fortnight back, in the court of justice where she and her three accomplices were tried; but then

she wore a bonnet and was closely veiled, so that he had not on that occasion observed the change which was taking place in her looks. Now he saw her without bonnet, without cap, and without veil, her thin, lank hair hanging down on her scraggy shoulders, and her lean, shrivelled form wrapped in a gown which hung as loosely upon her as if in mockery wrapping a skeleton. He was shocked, he staggered back from the revolting spectacle. He could not conceal his disgust even if it had killed her upon the spot, and she not only noticed his manner but also comprehended the reason of it.

"You find me much changed, Mr. Loftus?" she said; and her voice, no longer aided by the false teeth, was mumbling and almost inarticulate.

"I did not expect to find you looking cheerful and happy," responded our hero, instantly recovering himself and speaking in that gentle tone which was consistent with the generosity of his character, for he would not willingly enhance the pain which he knew full well the wretched woman must experience. "Indeed, I should have been very sorry to find you looking as you were wont to do, because that would have bespoken a hardness of heart which under circumstances — "

"Ah, under circumstances!" she repeated, quickly, and with greater strength of voice than before, as if the anguish of her feelings gave a power to her articulation. "Good God! and what circumstances? Death! death! The guillotine waiting for me — O horror! the guillotine!" and clasping her hands, that were skinny and skeleton-like, she quivered and shook with a convulsive trembling from head to foot.

Jocelyn Loftus placed himself on a stool that was near the table, and said, in a low and agitated voice, "Are you not prepared to die?"

"My God! can you put that question?" she exclaimed, hysterically, and her eyes actually glared from their caverned sockets, which were of a bluish, almost livid tint. "I sent for you to say that you must save me."

Loftus shook his head with mournful slowness.

"Why do you do that?" she demanded, abruptly, and with a short gasp, as if her utterance were nearly choked. "Why do you do that?"

"Can you not understand my meaning?" he said. "I

was told that you were resigned, that you welcomed the visits of the good clergyman whom the authorities have allowed to penetrate to your cell. I had hoped that his pious ministrations had prepared you."

"Oh, if all he says be true, what can I hope, where shall I go?" cried the wretched woman, her attenuated form again shaken by a convulsive shudder. "He speaks to me of heaven and hell, of a heaven full of happiness and a hell formed of a burning lake — ah! and I have seen it in my dreams, too. Oh, the fierce flames, the molten fire, the raging sea of red-hot brimstone!"

"But the minister has likewise told you that God is merciful, and that there is hope for the penitent?" said Loftus.

"Yes; but what surety have I that crimes like mine can be forgiven? Murder! Oh, it is the foulest, the most horrible of all black deeds. The blood of the victim sticks to one; all I see is blood-red. I behold you now through a crimson mist. It is horrible, horrible!" and the wretched woman covered her eyes with her fleshless hands, the veins of which were like knotted cords underneath the skin.

Jocelyn felt assured that her brain was touched, that her senses were impaired. He knew not what to say, or how to deal with the miserable creature under such circumstances.

"Well, what are you doing here," she suddenly exclaimed, removing her hands from her shrivelled countenance, "unless you have come to save me? You have the power — I know you have. A word from you to the syndicate will have the effect. Besides, you must save me. I cannot die, I am not prepared to die. I am old, and could not live long according to my natural span. Surely, surely it would be no great boon to accord me the year or two of existence which in the course of things would be mine. Let me be locked up in prison all the time. I do not ask to go out, but I ask to live. Heavens, I can do no more harm in this world. There is no scope for mischief in this dreadful place. Look around! A strong man in all his youthful vigour could not tear down those huge bars from the windows, nor break open that thick door, nor remove one single stone from the mass of masonry which makes these walls impenetrable as marble. Then, is it rational to fear that a poor, crushed, broken-down, enfeebled wretch like me could escape hence? No, no. Then why take my life? Why?"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Jocelyn Loftus, "I beseech you to tranquillize yourself, and to listen to me. This afternoon a message was left by the Protestant clergyman at the hotel where I am staying, to the effect that you wished to see me, if only for a few moments. I was not within at the time; I did not return to the hotel until an hour ago. It was then nine o'clock. I could not disregard the prayer of a fellow creature whose hours in this world are numbered."

"But why enter into such particulars?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, impatiently. "These things are trivial, oh, trivial to a degree, in comparison with the immense importance of my position. Let us talk, then, only on what can be done to save me."

"I pray you to listen," continued Loftus, impressively. "I was about to inform you that I went to the principal syndic to beseech a written order to visit you at once. I saw him, and he complied with my request. I asked him if —"

"If what?" demanded the wretched woman, with almost frenzied impatience, for she now guessed what was coming.

"I asked him, I say, whether there was any intention to commute your sentence," continued Loftus, with deepening solemnity of tone, "and he declared that the law must take its course."

"He did not! It is false!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, her features convulsing most hideously with a sort of frenzied rage as she spoke. "You only say this to avoid taking any further trouble in my behalf. You want to see me perish dreadfully on the scaffold. It is you who have done it all. Had you never come to Geneva to interfere with my plans, I should not have been led into the circumstances which have made me what I am and have placed me here. Cruel and heartless that you are, pitiless and implacable, it is you who have hunted me to the very death."

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Loftus, in a mournful tone, "I cannot be angry with one in your condition. But you must recollect that you prepared all this sad destiny for yourself. Wherefore did you ever embark in a course which was likely to conduct you, you knew not whither? But God forbid that I should reproach you now. Great as your sins have been, your punishment is also great, — great enough indeed, I hope, to be an atonement, but it is my duty to assure you that with the affairs of earth you have no further concern."

" Oh, forgive me, forgive me, my dear young man, if I said anything to offend you. I did not mean it. But there are moments when I know not what I say or do; my brain seems to be on fire, it is in a dreadful whirl. But tell me, tell me, that you will yet save me! Think of the horrors of such a death. My God! I shall go wild if I dare contemplate it. Mr. Loftus, you must save me — I cannot die. If they come to take me, I will scratch, I will scream, I will fly at the ruffian men like a tiger-cat. Oh, I will do a mischief! " and she laughed with a horrible frenzy.

" Do you not think that I had better go and fetch the clergyman to you once more? " asked Loftus, cruelly bewildered by this awful scene.

" No, he is of no use to me now," was the wretched woman's quick response. Then she paused, slowly bent down her eyes, and appeared to reflect profoundly. " Many, many years ago," she at length said, — and now she spoke in a strangely altered voice, a voice in which there was a low and mournful pathos, — " a sweet little girl was gamboling and skipping about in a beautiful garden full of fruits and flowers. Let us contemplate that dear innocent child when she was about five or six years old. What blushing roses were upon her cheeks, what lily purity upon her brow! Her dark brown hair flowed in myriads of clusters over her white neck and shoulders. What joy danced in her sunny eyes, what silver peals of mirth rolled forth from her red lips, and how glancingly did her tiny feet trip over the lawn, along the gravel walks, and amidst the parterres of flowers! And that little child, so gay, so innocent, so good, was a fond mother's darling. The mother was a widow, and this child was her treasure and her comfort. Behold that dear, kind mother coming forth from the picturesque cottage to which the garden belongs, and how that child bounds toward her! The butterfly wandering from flower to flower is not more happy than this young child. The melody of birds in the trees of that garden is not more delicious than the music of the child's mirth as its mother receives it with open arms. Oh, what a blissful scene, — innocence in its own appropriate paradise! Mr. Loftus, it is a picture of my own earliest years I am giving you. That child was myself."

As she thus spoke, Mrs. Ranger raised her eyes in a melancholy, oh, so melancholy a manner toward Jocelyn Loftus,

that his heart swelled with emotions, and he felt that the tears were trickling down his cheeks. He saw not the hideous hag before him, lean, wrinkled, and stricken by all the searing woes of age, crime, and calamity; he saw not the cold, cheerless dungeon, with its massive bars, its huge door, its impenetrable walls, its stone pavement, its vaulted roof, and its rough, meagre furniture; but so vividly had the picture which the woman drew been impressed upon his mind that he beheld only that sweet little innocent child she had delineated in so strangely touching a manner, and that garden scene with the picturesque cottage, all of which appeared a romantic and lovely reality to his mind's eye.

"But the scene changes," she went on to say, in a deeper mournfulness of voice. "A dozen years have passed, and in a sumptuously furnished apartment a beautiful young creature of seventeen or eighteen reclines upon a sofa. Yes, she is dazzlingly beautiful. All the evidences of wealth and luxury are about her person and in that apartment. Her dress is splendid: diamonds are upon her hair, pearls encircle her neck, pearls also hang over her naked bosom, and the richest bracelets set off her snow-white arms. The door opens; a powdered lackey enters to ask at what hour this lady will have the carriage. She gives him the required answer. Soon afterward an elegant French lady's-maid appears to bring costly stuffs, lace veils, silks and satins, for the lady's inspection. Milliners and drapers, mercers and jewellers, send their goods or await her orders. One of the most eminent artists of the day comes to receive instructions relative to her portrait. Thus the forenoon is disposed of. Then comes a handsome man in the prime of life, tall, portly, and with a noble bearing. He is one of the proudest peers of England, and this charming creature is his mistress. He is infatuated with her; he worships, he adores her, but he is already married and has a large family, or he would make her his wife. Nevertheless, he testifies his affection by all possible means. His wealth is immense, and he is never wearied of expending his gold to surround his loved one with all the luxuries and elegancies of life, not merely to gratify her slightest whims, but even to anticipate them. He has placed her in a splendid mansion, given her carriages and servants, and heaped upon her all the bounties, the extrava-

gances, and the profusions which the most refined luxury or the stateliest pomp could possibly require.

" But she does not love him in return. She never loved him. For her fall from innocence there is not even the apology of the heart's affection. She was dazzled only by his lofty rank, his boundless wealth, and the golden promises he made her. Thoughtless and giddy, notwithstanding the admirable training which she had received under a fond mother's care, she preferred to be a proud peer's mistress rather than a poor man's bride. She was dwelling in the country when he spoke to her of the grandeur of the metropolis; the simple enjoyments of a rural life seemed monotonous to her in comparison with the glowing pleasures associated with the mere name of London. Dazzled and intoxicated by all that was told her and all that she dreamed, excited and enchanted by the words that he spoke and the pictures her imagination drew, she had fallen. Yes, she had fled from her once happy home, and behold her now, the great lord's mistress. But she loved him not.

" Soon, however, she encountered a young man for whom she conceived a passion, and she intrigued with him. One day her noble admirer discovered her infidelity. Immense as his love had been, proportionately implacable was his vengeance now. He dispossessed her of everything he had bestowed upon her. In his rage he tore the jewels from her person, and trampled them under his foot; he then turned her forth from the splendid mansion where he had lodged her, and all in a moment she found herself stripped of every symbol of wealth, flung down from the pinnacle of prosperity, and in the street, homeless and friendless, with but a few guineas in her pocket. Well-nigh broken-hearted, she hastened to the young man whom she loved, and who had been, as it were, the cause of her downfall. But that very morning he had led a bride to the altar, and was away into the country to spend the honeymoon.

" What was the young creature to do now? She was not so thoroughly depraved as to be inaccessible to some of those tender whisperings which the voice of youthful memories breathes upward from the soul in moments such as that. Thoughts of a once happy home came vividly back to her recollection, and to her mind's eye arose the sweet picture of rural simplicity, the garden with its verdure, its gravel

walks, its parterres of flowers, and its lawn in front of the picturesque cottage. Ay, and she thought also of the fond, doting mother whom she had so cruelly abandoned, that widowed mother whose joy and darling and treasure she had been. Back, back, then, to that scene of her childhood, that once cherished spot, that home in a far-off county. But would it be a home to her again, would the door open to receive her, would the widowed mother's arms be unfolded to welcome her? Yes, yes; she at least had that hope. It was a splendid carriage which had borne her away from the cottage to the metropolis: it was the stage-coach now which took the fugitive back again. Pillowed on the breast of an adoring lover had she travelled away from that cottage: alone inside the cheerless public vehicle did she retrace her way thither.

"It was night when she was set down in the road, at the nearest point to the house. She had to walk a mile to reach it. The night was dark; it was the winter season, and the wind sighed amid the skeleton branches of the trees like the voices of the dead. Those sounds seemed full of weird portents to her, and she could hear her heart beat forcibly. Still went she on, and at length the cottage was reached. A light, a solitary light, was shining from a window; it was her mother's chamber. Oh, if she were ill? Heavens! the thought was intolerable, and the unhappy young creature leaned against the garden fence for support. At length she opened the gate and went in. Ah! it was no longer in innocence that she trod that ground where the steps of her childhood had played so glancingly along the gravel walks and amidst the parterres of flowers. It was in guilt, in shame, and in degradation that with feet as heavy as lead she dragged herself to the front door. She knocked, it was opened, and the old servant, who had been for years in the place, uttered an ejaculation so wild and strange that it struck dismay for an instant to the guilty young creature's heart. But the next moment, unable to bear the agonies of suspense, she flew up-stairs, rushed into her mother's chamber, and then stood suddenly transfixed in direst horror at the spectacle which met her view. Dim and sickly was the light which burned in the room, and an old woman was creeping about the bed, performing the last offices of a sick-nurse. But on that bed, O God! was stretched the lifeless

corpse of the broken-hearted mother, and the guilty daughter suddenly gave vent to a thrilling shriek of ineffable anguish, a shriek that rang through floor and ceiling, wall and roof, and pierced the brains of those who heard it. Then she staggered forward a few steps, reeled half-around, and fell heavily."

Here Mrs. Ranger paused again, and covering her face with her withered hands, she sobbed low, but with an inward convulsiveness that denoted a mortal anguish. She had narrated this second chapter in her own sad history, for it was her own tale she was telling, with a mournful evenness and painful continuity of tone, not seeming exactly to address herself to Loftus, nor to have the deliberate intent of unveiling to him the secrets of her earlier life, but rather giving audible expression to the train of recollections which circumstances had now so vividly conjured up. But he listened with the deepest, deepest interest, for it was a tale which no man could hear unmoved. The tears even trickled down his cheeks, and his heart swelled with emotion, for in imagination he saw every feature, every detail, every incident of the woman's history as plainly as if it were being enacted upon a theatre, and he a spectator of the whole drama.

" Years passed away," continued Mrs. Ranger, resuming her audible musings after a deep silence of several minutes, " and during that period many were the vicissitudes which the guilty daughter had known. She had seen the remains of her mother, that mother whom her crime had murdered, deposited in the churchyard. She had seen the damp clay heaped up over the coffin. Some time afterward she had revisited the spot and had seen the grass growing upon the grave. But whenever, in the deep winter's night, she lay awake and heard the winds moaning or sighing or raving without, she thought how cold, oh, how cold that poor mother must be slumbering in her grave. She thought how the rude blasts would howl, and sweep in fury, stern and pitiless, bleak and chill, over the greensward and amid the tombstones in that lone churchyard. It was to avoid such thoughts as these that she plunged headlong into dissipation. She became the mistress of one man, then the mistress of another; sometimes being heartlessly deserted or thrust off by him to whom she surrendered herself, at other times

being detected in intrigue elsewhere, and discarded with bitterest reproaches, perhaps with blows. Sometimes she revelled in luxury, at others she was the occupant of a garret; now sitting down to a sumptuously spread table, and now pledging the last article of her clothing for the wherewith to obtain a morsel of food.

"At length, when living for a brief interval in a somewhat more respectable manner, but upon the gold which she had received as the wages of infamy, she was courted by a worthy man in tolerable circumstances. His name was Ranger. She married him. He thought he was espousing a respectable widow, and he was confiding, indulgent, and happy. Three or four years thus passed, and she endeavoured to avoid those courses which had given her so many, many bitter experiences. But temptation came again. She was still young, still handsome, and in an evil moment she listened to the dishonourable suit of a young nobleman whom chance threw in her way.

"For a brief period this intrigue was carried on without the knowledge of the husband, but at length his suspicion was awakened by something he heard. For he obtained a clue to the former character of his wife; he was thus led to make inquiries, and found, to his horror and dismay, that it was the veriest profligate whom he had espoused. The cast-off mistress of many men, the refuse of lovers too numerous to be easily remembered, the guilty thing whose crimes had broken her mother's heart and sent that fond parent in misery and anguish to a premature grave, — such was the woman whom a respectable man in all trustfulness had taken to his heart, placed at the head of his household, and honoured with his confidence and his love. The exposure was terrific, and expelled, penniless and friendless, from the house of an outraged husband, the wretched creature found herself deserted also by the heartless noble whose fatal love had thus consummated her ruin. Poor Ranger died of a broken heart, another of her victims. But not one single shilling did he leave her in his will. It is true that her name was mentioned there, but in terms of horror and of loathing, yea, and with curses also."

Here the condemned woman paused again. This time she covered not her face with her hands, but clasped them together, agitating them convulsively, shaking her head

with nervous quickness, and giving vent to bitter lamentations expressive of the anguished memories which thus surged up into her almost frenzied brain. Jocelyn Loftus wept not now. He no longer beheld before him either the cherub-child disporting in the garden of flowers, or the betrayed and deluded girl returning home in penitence and sorrow to crave a parent's forgiveness. But he saw before him an inveterate profligate, a vile, dissolute woman, the hideous personification of every gross immorality, a wretch for whom early experiences had no salutary warnings, and who was fitted only to betray all love, all confidence, and break all affectionate hearts. He gazed upon her with a sort of mournful sternness, but she heeded him not, and after another long pause, concluded her narrative in these terms:

" Years and years have passed since Ranger died, and varied and checkered has been the existence of her whom he discarded and who was left behind him. Through all kinds of profligacy has she dragged herself, through a morass of vices, pollutions, and infamies has she floundered on, dissolute in respect to herself so long as the fire of her passions lasted and she could find lovers to share in her obscene pleasures. But such a course made her prematurely old, and as dissipation showed its fearful ravages, she became an object for loathing and disgust, instead of for admiration and love. The healthful bloom faded from her cheeks, her hair, once so redundant in its glorious beauty, grew lank and thin, her teeth fell out, her once splendid bust had become shrivelled into hideousness, her form wasted into a mere collection of bones covered by a wrinkled and sallow skin. Farewell, then, to all the pleasures of voluptuous delight and sensual joy for her, and it was not the least of the punishments which she endured that her desires outlived in fevered frenzy the possibility of gratifying them. But to live — what was she to do for the means of subsistence? Having been the daughter of crime herself, she now became the mother of iniquity. Vile in its hypocrisies as had been her heart, so vile in its artificialities was her person now rendered. Cosmetics and all the falsities of the toilet still made her presentable, if no longer lovable, and she tutored herself to adopt an air and a demeanour suited to her new avocation. Deeply versed in intrigue, but no longer able to intrigue for herself, she intrigued for others.

" Assuming the position of a respectable widow, she secretly became a procuress of the vilest description. Oh, if all the damsels whom she has inveigled into her meshes and betrayed to their ruin could now stand forward and bear witness against her, if all the young virgins whom she has enticed beneath her roof and sold to the polluting embrace of lustful aristocrats and the hoary dignitaries of the Church could now gather here and speak out, and if the tomb could send up all the victims whom her detestable machinations have helped in consigning to it, how many broken hearts would be arrayed as terrible accusers against her! Oh, the vilest brothels, the darkest dens of infamy, have seen no wrongs and beheld no injuries inflicted upon credulous damsels more flagrant than those wrongs and those injuries which she has perpetrated in her time. Ah! was it possible that such a career could glide on tranquilly until the end? Was it natural that a life pursuing its course amidst such matchless infamies could terminate in a peaceful death-bed and in an honoured grave? No, no. I deserve it all. Yes, the Destroyer is approaching. He comes, he comes, arrayed in more than usual terrors; he has put on all his hideousness. The grim skeleton is surrounded by every horror known beyond the grave."

While giving utterance to these last words, the wretched woman started from the pallet, drew herself upright, extended her long lank hands toward one corner of the cell, and fixed her glaring eyes in the same direction, as if she beheld some horrible object stationed there. Loftus likewise rose from his seat, and stepped back a pace or two as he gazed upon the doomed being with indescribable loathing and horror. He could scarcely feel any further pity on her behalf. Such shocking revelations had gushed forth from her lips, like a stream of fetid, putrid feculence, that he could scarcely persuade himself he beheld before him a being possessed of a human heart. She seemed like a fiend in female shape.

" Oh, yes, the reality of my doom is now before me," she cried, in tones of rending anguish. " The scaffold awaits me, the guillotine is raised. But who are you? " she suddenly demanded, her wildly glaring eyes now resting upon Loftus. " Ah! I remember," and she sank back to a sitting posture upon the bed again. " I have been giving vent to

all the memories which arose in my brain," she continued, in a more subdued and deliberate manner, " and you have heard, Mr. Loftus, some shocking things. But think you not that I have been punished enough? Picture to yourself all that I have endured since that dreadful night when you and Baron Bergami seized upon me in my own chamber at the villa, and the terrible sound of Murderess rang in my ears."

" Mrs. Ranger," said our hero, in a low and solemn voice, " I can only repeat the words which I uttered ere now. You have no further concern with the affairs of this life. All the deeds of your past existence have just been revealed to my ears; perhaps this outpouring of confessions may have somewhat relieved your soul. Therefore do I beseech you, fix your thoughts only upon that solemn subject which should now prove all-engrossing — "

" What! " shrieked forth the wretched woman, in the wildness of her despair, " you bid me abandon all hope? No, no, I cannot resign myself thus to die. You must save me, you must save me! "

Loftus shook his head with slow solemnity, saying, " For the last time am I compelled to assure you that you have no hope. And now, farewell."

" Stop one moment," exclaimed the doomed creature. " I wish to ask you a few questions. Oh, do remain but another minute or two, and I will be calm, I will be calm! " she added, with a visible endeavour to subdue her horrified feelings, but she shuddered all over as if an ice-blast had poured in upon her.

" Speak, then, for I must leave you now, so that the clergyman may return."

" Tell me, Mr. Loftus, is not my name mentioned with curses and execrations out-of-doors? " she asked. " Will there not be an immense crowd to-morrow? " and again she shuddered visibly. " Shall I be ill-treated on my way to — to — "

" I think not; indeed, I am certain you have nothing to fear on that head. The police officers will protect you."

" My God, my God! And those three men, are they to die also? Will they be pardoned? "

" No, there is not the slightest chance of that."

" And Doctor Maravelli, what has become of him? " asked

Mrs. Ranger, forcing herself to maintain a calmness which was nevertheless horrible to contemplate, because it was like the surface of ice upon a river in the depths of whose waters hideous monsters and reptiles lurk and agitate.

" Maravelli is expelled the Genevese territory," replied Jocelyn. " There was nothing against him beyond having given his assistance in an illegal manner at the birth of a child, and I had promised to do my best to save him from any serious entanglement with the law."

" And why did you promise him that? " demanded Mrs. Ranger, eagerly.

" Because to a considerable extent he aided some of my plans," replied Loftus. " This I explained to the authorities, and interceded for him. They accordingly considered that justice would be satisfied by his expatriation."

" And will justice then be satisfied with nothing short of my death? " asked Mrs. Ranger. " Can you not, will you not intercede for me? "

" It is useless," returned Jocelyn.

" But do you wish me dead? Is it your desire to hurry me to the scaffold? Do you thirst for my blood? " she demanded, with passionate vehemence.

" Heaven forbid! " was the quick reply. " But I am powerless in the matter. Did it rest with me," he added, solemnly, " I should conceive that justice would be satisfied and outraged society should be content with dooming you to imprisonment for the remainder of your life. Indeed, that you may not carry with you to the grave a false sentiment relative to my feelings, I do not hesitate to declare that I am averse to the punishment of death altogether."

" Then, in the name of God, do something to save me, I conjure you to do something to save me! " and Mrs. Ranger fell upon her knees at his feet, looking up toward his countenance and raising her clasped hands.

" Rise, Mrs. Ranger, rise," he said, in an earnest voice, " for I can allow no human being to kneel to me. Were I a king I would not permit it. Rise, therefore, ere I speak another word."

" To obey you, I do it," she said, slowly raising herself up, and standing before him in all the wretchedness of her physical ugliness and her moral degradation. " There, you see I am obedient. Now — "

" Mrs. Ranger, I solemnly assure you that I appealed to the syndics on your behalf," continued Jocelyn. " I represented that the princess herself, deeply as you had injured her, craved not your life, that Baron Bergami, for whose heart the murderous blow was destined, sought not your death."

" And what was the result? " asked the wretched woman, with an agonized feverishness of impatience.

" There is no hope," returned Jocelyn, solemnly. " The law will take its course."

Mrs. Ranger sank back once more upon the pallet. She seemed confounded; all hope was now evidently crushed within her. She said not a word, and it almost appeared as if the bitterness of death were at this instant passing away. Some portion of her natural strength of mind appeared to revive again, and, half-suppressing a convulsive gasp, she said, " Now do I know the worst. I am astonished that even for a single moment I could have cherished the idea that mercy would be shown me."

Then there was a pause of several minutes, during which the unhappy woman appeared to be looking inwardly, communing with herself.

Jocelyn was most anxious to get away. The scene had altogether been painful beyond description, and though he did not choose to consult his watch, because it would be far too cruelly significant a hint for her how time was passing, yet he could tolerably well conjecture that nearly two hours must have elapsed from the moment he entered that cell. But he still experienced enough compassion for the miserable woman, and, at all events, possessed feelings of too delicate and considerate a nature to hasten away at a moment when such a proceeding would disturb the solemn meditation in which she was engaged.

" Yes, I have now abandoned all hope," said Mrs. Ranger, again breaking silence. " But tell me, — for those who come near me in this dreadful dungeon will give me no information relative to aught that is passing without, — tell me, I say, how fares it with those unhappy girls, Agatha and Julia? God knows I did not mean to cause their sister's death. Alas, poor Emma! "

" Sad and sorrowful is the lesson which the fate of those three young women teaches," answered Loftus. " One,

as you know, already lies in a premature grave, and the other two — "

"Speak, what of them?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, seeing that he hesitated. "Tell me everything. Methinks I shall die more easily if I know the worst in every respect, because my feelings must be relieved from all suspense. Speak, then."

"Yes, for the reason you have set forth, I will answer your question," rejoined Loftus. "Know, then, that Agatha and Julia are the inmates of a madhouse; their senses have abandoned them for ever."

"O God! this is horrible — and yet it is better than death. Mr. Loftus, I am calm now; my soul is nerved to meet my doom. Farewell."

"Farewell, and may Heaven have mercy upon you."

In a few moments the door opened to give Jocelyn Loftus egress from the cell of the doomed woman. The turnkey and the Protestant minister were walking together in the passage, and as our hero issued forth from the dungeon, the reverend pastor went in to give the last consolations of religion to Mrs. Ranger.

As our hero crossed the threshold of the prison gate again and stepped into the street, the church clocks proclaimed the hour of midnight, but the moment the iron tongues of the huge bells in the towers had ceased to beat the air with their deep metallic notes, a smaller bell with sombre tone took up the sound. This was rung by a watchman passing up the street in which the prison was situated, and when he had made his bell clang forth half a dozen consecutive strokes, he said, in a loud but lugubrious voice, "Past midnight! Good people all, pray for the souls of those who are to die in a few hours!"

Jocelyn shuddered, and, quickening his pace, he returned to the Hotel Royal, where he had taken up his quarters since the terrible tragedy at Maravelli's.

CHAPTER X

THE GUILLOTINE

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and brightly shone the sun in a heaven of unclouded azure. Lake Leman never seemed more beautiful, or the Alpine scenery in the distance more sublimely grand. It was a day fitted only for universal rejoicing, and to serve as a holiday to commemorate some happy event. But though the streets of Geneva were crowded to excess, and multitudes were pouring in from all the surrounding districts, yet was it no festive occasion. For there, in the principal square of the republican city, stood a sinister object, and the golden beams of the cloudless sun were reflected in the hideous ax of the guillotine.

Yes, an immense crowd was collected, and the windows, balconies, and roofs of all the dwellings looking upon the spot were put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Pity was it that so many, many young damsels, wearing the picturesque attire of the rural districts or the mountain heights in the neighbourhood, should have donned their Sunday raiment for such an occasion, but so it was. The pretty caps, white as the snow upon the Alpine summits in the distance, and resting upon hair arranged in heavy masses or else in beauteous braids, those bodices laced with coloured ribbons, and imprisoning busts modelled in the most voluptuous style of woman's symmetry, those gracefully flowing petticoats, leaving so much of the well-shaped legs displayed, all assuredly set off the charms of the Genevese damsels to their utmost advantage; but, ah! were these damsels gathered in that market-place now for the mere purpose of being seen and admired? No, on this occasion they scarcely thought of themselves. They had put on their Sunday raiment because it was their habit to do so when stealing a day from

their usual avocations, and when congregating in great numbers. But all their thoughts, all their ideas, all their interest, in short, seemed absorbed in the legal tragedy that was about to take place.

There were not many troops present. The people of Geneva, having republican institutions, and governing themselves, are in the habit of preserving order without the coercion and repression of large military and constabulary forces. Still there were a few soldiers and mounted gendarmes, for the purpose of keeping the space about the scaffold clear, and maintaining a pathway amidst the dense mass for the passage of the vehicle that was expected.

The behaviour of the multitude was most decorous, forming a strange contrast with that of the crowds which assemble at the Old Bailey in London to witness the execution of a criminal. There, at Geneva, no ribald jests were heard, no practical jokes were played; there was no loud, coarse laughing, no disgraceful quarrelling, none of those indecencies and obscenities which are enacted on an execution morning around the drop in front of Newgate. True, the same morbid feeling of curiosity which serves to gather the crowd in the Old Bailey had now congregated these masses in the market-place at Geneva, but there the similitude ceased. For around the Genevese guillotine the bearing of the populace was as solemn and as respectful as if those gathered masses had come to assist at a funeral. Upon every countenance might be seen an expression of mingled awe and terror and grief, and any remarks that were made were uttered in subdued whispers, as if those who spoke felt that they were in the presence of the dead.

But let us turn our attention to the front of the prison, which establishment was situated at some little distance from the great square. At the door of that gloomy gaol stood a rude, uncouth-looking vehicle, like a common cart, drawn by two horses. Inside four coffins were placed. An escort of gendarmes was in attendance. A little after eleven the prison door was thrown open, and the three male criminals, Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden, came forth, accompanied by the Catholic priest who had all along been appointed to minister unto them. They were evidently much cast down, although to the best of their power they strove to maintain a bold front. Kobolt was the least depressed

of the three, but he was a man of more dogged resolution and decided character than his comrades. On ascending the cart they all three gave signs of a cold horror stealing upon them as they beheld their coffins, and for a moment the expression which swept over Hernani's and Walden's features was full of anguish. Kobolt hastened to seat himself on the edge of the vehicle in such a way that the priest might stand between him and the piled-up coffins.

No manifestation of feeling broke forth from the crowd assembled in front of the prison. There were neither hootings nor yellings, but, on the other hand, there were no expressions of compassion. The desperate characters of the three criminals had so fully transpired on the occasion of their trial that their fate was not likely to enlist much sympathy in their favour.

Again the prison door opens, and now all eyes are turned upon the wretched object who comes forth. It is Mrs. Ranger. Hideous as she already was when Loftus saw her a few hours back, yet more awful still was the change which had since taken place in her appearance. No conception of the most horrible witch that ever brewed her hell-broth in hollow rock or gloomy cavern could outvie the revolting aspect of the doomed woman. It was evident she was exerting all her courage for this awful occasion, evident also that she had worked herself thus up to a pitch of energy which would give way with the least untoward incident. On issuing forth from the gaol, she swept her eyes around with a quick glance of apprehension, as if fearful of receiving ill-treatment from the multitude, and then the very next moment she seemed appalled by the silence so deep, so ominous, which prevailed. Not a murmur was heard, not a syllable was breathed, even in the lowest whisper, as the turnkeys helped her up into the cart. She threw a shuddering look upon the coffins, and it was only with an almost preter-human effort that she prevented herself from giving vent to her anguish by one loud, long, and terrific shriek.

The cart moved on. The three men were, as already stated, attended by the Catholic priest, and Mrs. Ranger had the Protestant minister with her. In order that the voices of the two holy men might not jar with each other and create confusion for the ears of the doomed ones, they each spoke in low tones, perhaps all the more impressive

and solemn on that account. Mrs. Ranger listened at first with deep attention, and her lips from time to time moved as if in her heart she was echoing the clergyman's prayer. Kobolt maintained a sullen reserve, but Hernani and Walden rapidly grew more attentive to the priest as the vehicle proceeded toward its terrible destination.

The wretched woman had purposely avoided meeting the eyes of the three men who were about to suffer for having consummated a crime which her gold had bribed them to commit. They had, however, gazed with some degree of wonder upon her when she first came forth from the prison door, for they were at a loss to believe that it was possible for a human being to become so changed in a few weeks. She seemed to them at least twenty years older than at the time when the terrible deed for which they were all about to suffer was perpetrated.

The cart moved onward, attended by the escort, and surrounded by the multitude which kept pace with it. Solemn was the silence which prevailed, so far as human voices were concerned, those of the two priests being alone audible to the ears of the condemned criminals. But the sweep of the multitude, the trampling of so many feet, the heavy sounds of the cart's massive wheels, and the hoofs of the horses that drew it, as well as of the mounted escort, combined to form a din as of a flowing torrent. The procession had to pass through the street in which the Hotel Royal was situated, and though Mrs. Ranger had kept her eyes bent down from the moment she first entered the cart till now, yet she seemed to have an intuitive idea when the vehicle arrived opposite that establishment. Then she raised her looks, and swept them rapidly over the numerous windows fronting the street. They were all occupied with spectators, and therefore in so hurried a glance it would have been impossible for her to discern whether Jocelyn Loftus was of the number at any one window, but from all she knew of the young man she felt persuaded that he was not. And she was right. Not for worlds would our hero have gazed upon that spectacle of human misery.

On went the procession, and in a few minutes Mrs. Ranger knew that it was on the point of turning from the street into the great square, and that on gaining the angle of the line of buildings on the right hand her eyes would obtain a view of

something sinister, — indeed, the guillotine. Now she no longer heard what the clergyman said; his voice was as a mere droning in her ears. The blood appeared to be rushing up to her brain with a violence as if to make it burst. Sparks seemed to scintillate before her eyes, her arms and limbs tingled to the extremities of the fingers and toes, as if being singed all over. She kept her looks fixed on the angle of the street, that angle to which every instant brought her nearer and around which the first glance would show her the guillotine. It was a horrible fascination; she could not help it. Something appeared to compel her to fix her eyes on that point, while something, on the other hand, appeared to try might and main to bend her looks in another direction. But the former power was the greater; yet between the two she was tortured horribly, the conflict being, as it were, in every vein, artery, nerve, fibre, muscle, and sinew of her frame. At length the angle is reached, the cart turns somewhat, and behold! the two tall black spars of the guillotine, with the triangular ax shining ghastly in the sunlight, strike upon her view, the whole apparatus upreared above that ocean of human heads.

"My God, my God!" she murmurs, audibly, and at the same time Walden and Hernani, stricken by a mortal terror, sink down upon their knees at the feet of the Catholic priest.

Kobolt remains sitting on the edge of the vehicle, but his countenance is now hideous in its pallor, and its workings are awful to contemplate. He is now beginning to look death more closely in the face; he is walking up to it. In a few minutes more they will meet, they will touch.

But Mrs. Ranger, how feels she now? O heavens! what would she give to recall the past? What would she give to be enabled to live over again the last few months of her existence? Are her thoughts now reflected back to those times when she was the innocent child, with the cherub cheeks and the flowing hair, disporting in the garden of fruits and flowers? Does she think of the period when, as the cherished mistress of her noble seducer and in the glory of her beauty, she reclined upon the sofa, giving orders to her lackeys, and inspecting the rich merchandise which all the finest warehouses of London sent for her approval? Yes, oh, yes, she remembers all this, the bright days of her childhood, the luxuries and the splendours which were the reward

of her fall from virtue. Ah! and she remembers likewise that lone churchyard in which there is a humble grave, unadorned with marble monument and marked by no stone, but where the grass grows over the heaped-up clay, and above which in winter-time the cold winds moan and sigh and roar and rave in the alternating voices of sorrow and of fury. Yes, nor less does she review every detail and feature of her own vile career. For the faculty of thought is not laggard now. Such a vivid keenness is imparted to her mental perceptions that in a few moments her memory can run its eye over the incidents of years, and in an incredibly short space of time, the space of two or three minutes, can she embrace every incident, from the earliest scene in the cottage garden of a distant county down to this present chapter of her life which is about to close with the guillotine that stands there, in the market-place of Geneva.

Still amidst a profound silence, so far as the voices of the crowd are concerned, does the cart move on. Oh, is there nought to be done whereby she can be saved? Does man know not of any atonement which she can make? Has the law left no loophole through which she can creep? Will not justice relent at the last moment? This Protestant minister, who is a Genevese, and much respected in the city, could he do nothing for her? She is about to ask him, when a voice whispers in her soul that she has already done so a hundred times over, and that the holy man has no more power to save her than the carter who is driving her to the scaffold, or any one of the gendarmes who are guarding her progress thither. She must die, then? O heavens, she must die! What, when the sun is shining in such gorgeous splendour, and the heavens are cloudless, and all nature seems smiling and glad? Is it possible she can be doomed to die on such a day as this? No, no; it were an outrage offered to Heaven to shed human blood on such a day. They must bear her back to prison and wait till the weather changes, and becomes congenial for the taking of human life, when the sky shall be overcast with black clouds and the sun be veiled, and the buildings shall gleam not in his glorious light, and when, too, the ax of the guillotine shall seem a dull mass like lead, and not bright and shining as silver.

Such was the train of frenzied thoughts which swept through the wretched woman's mind as the cart moved

onward to the scaffold erected in the middle of the great square. Nearer and nearer it approaches; more terrible grows the apparatus of death. Oh, it is all a hideous dream, or a reality too fearful to contemplate, — so fearful, indeed, that it is only by questioning its possibility until the very last that the mind is saved from reeling beneath the shock and going mad.

The cart stops within a few feet of the steps at the back part of the scaffold. The platform is about ten feet high, lofty enough, therefore, for the entire mass of the populace around to behold the full enactment of the appalling tragedy. In the front part the two black spars tower aloft with an interval of about three feet between them. The ax is suspended close up to the cross-beam, and the string which retains it there or lets it fall at pleasure has the end fastened to a peg conveniently placed for the hand of the executioner to reach. A plank, about four feet long, and with one end fastened by a hinge to the platform, is so placed as to serve for binding the victim to it. Two pieces of wood resembling the stocks in which vagrants used to be set in England, but with only one hole, and this intended for the head of the criminal, are fitted between the lower part of the two spars. The uppermost piece of wood, being movable, works in grooves cut into the spars a short way up, but another groove runs up each spar to the very top, and in these does the ax of the guillotine work. Immediately in front of the place where the criminal's head is thrust in what may be termed the stocks an immense basket filled with sawdust is put to catch the head and the blood when the gleaming hatchet descends and does its awful work.

Such were the dread paraphernalia of death, such the arrangements of the guillotine. All these details were embraced in a single moment, ay, and comprehended, too, with a horrible clearness, by Mrs. Ranger. She shut her eyes for the first moment following the fearful survey which she thus took, but she was compelled by a dread fascination to open them again and fix them on the object of this appalling interest. As for her three companions in crime and punishment, they were now completely stricken down by the presence of death's ghastly engine, and even Kobolt began to join his accomplices in the mournful lamentations which during the last minute or two they had been putting forth.

Two men now ascended the platform of the guillotine. These were the executioner and his assistant. Stationing themselves near the plank, they waited for the gendarmes to bring them up the first individual who was to suffer. This was Mrs. Ranger. The authorities had deemed that it would be more merciful to put her out of her misery as speedily as possible, rather than suffer her to be a spectatrix of the decapitation of her companions first. Hernani wished her good-bye, and extended his hand. It was a good feeling which, at such a moment, prompted such a man thus to separate in peace from the woman who might almost be regarded as the authoress of his own calamity, inasmuch as it was she who had bribed him and his accomplices to commit the crime for which they were all about to suffer. But it was only with a mechanical movement that she took the outstretched hand, for her senses were now all paralyzed by the horror of consternation and dismay. Kobolt and Walden followed Hernani's example; their hands were also shaken for a moment, but in the same mechanical, unconscious manner, and then Mrs. Ranger was conducted by two gendarmes up the steps of the guillotine, the Protestant minister bearing her company.

Words have no power to convey the state of mind which this miserable woman experienced now, as she stood upon the threshold of another world; but we can scarcely say experienced, because she had no power of comprehending the condition of her own feelings. She seemed to be walking in a dream, yet a dream so horrible, so full of consternation, so fraught with utter dismay, that it was accompanied with the most poignant of agonies. The executioner and his assistant took her by the arms and placed her against the plank, which they had raised to a vertical position, and they proceeded to fasten her to it. Now she became convulsed with quick gaspings, and the Protestant minister, who was nigh, breathed a prayer in her ears. But it was as if he stood upon the seashore preaching to the waves when roaring in the rage of the tempest, for a similar storm was in her brain, and she heard him not. Suddenly, however, she gave a convulsive start, swept her eyes wildly around, and in that quick, lightning glance embraced the crowd, the tall spars in front of her, and all the principal features of the scene.

"Just Heaven! it is no dream, then? It is a reality!" she cried forth, in a rending tone; and then, after a single moment's pause, there thrilled from her lips a shriek as wild, as penetrating, as fully fraught with an ineffable agony as that which between thirty and forty years ago she had given when standing by the side of her mother's corpse.

But this shriek which she sent forth now on the scaffold of the guillotine in the great square of Geneva was one such as had never been heard before, a scream which those who did hear have never since forgotten, and which has often rung again and again in imagination through their brains. Oh, it was a fearful, fearful thing to be present there and hear that death-note of a human being's wild and excruciating terror going up from the platform of the ghastly engine of destruction into the air all golden with the effulgence of the glorious sun! It was a dread and a shocking thing that such a wail should pierce the noontide air on such a day, while nature was smiling and happy and joyous all around.

But what had this to do with the march of what is called human justice and the execution of man's bloodthirsty law? Having given vent to that agonizing scream, the wretched woman fell into an immediate stupor, and though she was still alive, yet all consciousness had abandoned her. Being strapped to the plank, she was lowered upon it to a horizontal position, so that her head was received in the semicircular indenture in the lower half of the stocks; the upper half was instantaneously let down, and her neck was now held shut in the hole, her head hanging out convenient for the stroke of the hatchet. And that was soon given. The executioner loosened the string from the peg, down fell the axe with a whirring noise, the blow was struck, the head was severed, and with a great gush of blood it fell into the basket beneath.

To unstrap the trunk, hurry it away to its coffin in the cart, and carry the severed head thither also, was the work of but a couple of minutes. Then one after another did the three "fishers of men" ascend the scaffold, and suffer death in the presence of the awestricken multitude.

CHAPTER XI

VALENTINE AND VENETIA

RETURN we once more to Carlton House.

It was about midday, and Lady Sackville had just descended from her boudoir to the drawing-room of her suite of apartments, when a domestic entered to state that Sir Valentine Malvern requested an interview with her ladyship, and that he hoped it would be accorded him. Venetia at once desired that he might be admitted, and in a few minutes the young baronet was ushered into the drawing-room.

"I gave you a special invitation to call upon me," said Venetia, extending her hand with graceful affability toward him, "and yet you send in a message as if you thought that there was some difficulty in obtaining access to me."

"It is but midday," answered Sir Valentine, "full two hours earlier than the proper time for paying visits of ceremony or courtesy, but, as it appeared to me, the most suitable hour for making a call on a matter of business."

"A matter of business?" echoed Venetia, with a sweet smile, "I am at a loss to conceive how there can be any business between us. But in any case you are welcome. As for the propriety of the hour, you are quite right, Sir Valentine. This is just that disagreeable part of the day when there is little or nothing to do, and it is difficult to know how to amuse oneself."

"A little embroidery, or tambour-work, or drawing?" suggested Sir Valentine; but he spoke in a somewhat melancholy manner, and also with a partial embarrassment amounting to constraint.

"I dislike such occupations," answered Venetia. "I was always of indolent habits. I used once to be much addicted to novel-reading, but latterly I have given it up.

I find that there are so very, very few books in which the world is depicted truly. It was all very well when I was accustomed to judge the world entirely by the books I read; then they had an extraordinary charm for me."

"And yet your ladyship has read other books besides novels?" said Valentine, gazing upon her with a sort of mournful interest.

"Yes, assuredly," she replied, again smiling with all her wonted sweetness. "Does not the world call me accomplished? Well, and without vanity I may say that so I am, considering how little it requires to render a lady accomplished in high life. For instance, I have read all our best poets, and possessing a memory of very great power, — this too I may say without vanity, because memory is a gift, — I can repeat the finest and most striking passages of these works. Then I can draw when I choose. Here," she continued, rising from the sofa on which she was seated, and approaching a table where she opened a splendid portfolio, "these are my specimens. See, here are drawings in chalk, and drawings in pencil, and here are designs in water-colours. Most of these I did when at Acacia Cottage, before I came to Carlton House, but since I have been here I have had no time for drawing, or, rather, perhaps no inclination."

"They are very beautiful," said Valentine, who had followed Lady Sackville to the table. "I should not think of flattering you for a moment," he continued, "but I myself am very fond of drawing, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing these specimens to exhibit a great proficiency. And yet they bear every indication of a taste rapidly cultivated and not gradually developed, a taste, so to speak, which put forth all its powers of a sudden, and grappled with difficult subjects before it passed entirely through the usual length of training."

"You are right, Sir Valentine," answered Venetia, "and now I see that you are really no flatterer, but at the same time an excellent judge. Well, then, for my other accomplishments, I am considered a tolerably good musician, quite good enough to compete with any lady who sits down to her piano or her harp either for her own recreation or that of her friends, at a select party. Then, as for my conversation, when you and I come to know more of each other you will be able to judge me on that score."

"And do you think," asked Sir Valentine, surveying her with a singular expression, "that we shall know more of each other? Do you wish it?"

"Did I not give you a pressing invitation to call?" asked Venetia. Then resuming her seat on the sofa, while the young baronet returned to the chair which he had taken near her, she said, in a somewhat more serious tone, "But tell me, Sir Valentine, what you meant ere now by saying that your visit was of a business character? Perhaps the answer will explain wherefore I behold a certain constraint in your manner."

"Do you consider my manner to be unfriendly?" he asked, with some degree of hesitation.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Venetia, "I was rejoiced to find that almost from the first moment you entered the room we began conversing in the most friendly manner together, so that I was actually induced to enter upon an account of all my accomplishments. But I hope you will believe me, Sir Valentine, when I assure you on my honour as a lady," added Venetia, seriously, "that it was in the same unaffected, artless manner as of a sister talking to a brother."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Valentine Malvern, and again did so singular an expression of mingled embarrassment and yet kind interest pass over his countenance that Venetia saw there was something more in his mind than she could comprehend.

"I see," she said, "that you wish to speak to me upon some subject that you nevertheless hesitate to approach." Then, in a still lower tone, she added, "Perhaps it is relative to the first time we ever met? You seek an explanation —"

"Do not for a moment fancy that I come hither swayed by an impertinent curiosity," interrupted Valentine.

"You have never mentioned —" began Venetia.

"Never," rejoined Malvern, instantaneously comprehending what she meant. "I was in St. George's Church when you were married to Lord Sackville, then Mr. Sackville —"

"What, you were there?" exclaimed Venetia, in astonishment.

"Yes; it was, however, with no specific intention, it was purely accidental. But when I saw you I was struck with

amazement. For some weeks or months previously I had heard of Miss Trelawney, — every one had heard of Miss Trelawney, — and I was astonished on being told in that church and on that occasion that you were Miss Trelawney. Then said I to myself, ' I am mistaken; ' and yet I could not altogether convince myself that I was so. I do not wish to flatter you, very far from that, but I was at a loss to believe at the time that there could be another young lady in the world resembling the Miss Venetia Trelawney whom I saw walk up the aisle of St. George's Church and proceed to the altar on that occasion."

" Well, and you were never led to make inquiries? " asked Lady Sackville.

" No, never," responded Malvern. " I have already told you that I have no impertinent curiosity; and besides, though temporarily interested in you, and the apparent mystery attending you at that time, I was too much engrossed with my poor father's disappearance to give the circumstance a prominent place in my memory. But the other night, when you interrupted my interview with the prince, from the very signs you made me did I perceive that the suspicion which I had entertained at St. George's Church was, after all, the correct one, and that the young lady passing by the name of Venetia Trelawney was really the same whom I had once before met under such very different circumstances."

" And now you seek explanations? " said Venetia, quickly.

" No, very far from it," responded Malvern. " I have already assured you that I have no impertinent curiosity. Besides which, under ordinary circumstances your affairs would not regard me, and I trust that I know the position and the duties of a gentleman too well to pry into the secrets of any lady."

" Under ordinary circumstances, you say? " ejaculated Venetia. " Are there, then, some extraordinary circumstances," she inquired, " relative to you and me? "

" Do you not think," asked Malvern, " that I am talking to you in a somewhat familiar strain, despite a certain embarrassment and awkwardness which I just now felt, but which is rapidly wearing off the nearer I approach the final revelation? But I ask, do you not think that I am conversing in a sort of familiar, free, and offhand manner,

as if there had subsisted between us the intimacy of several years, or as if we were cousins, or anything else of the kind you like? And yet this is but the third time I have ever spoken to you in my life: once in Hanover Square, — you know when, — the other night in the presence of the prince, and now."

"But I am not at all offended at your manner," said Venetia. "Perhaps I rather encouraged it by my own when you first entered the room."

"You know that I am engaged to be married to Florence Eaton?" said Malvern.

"I have heard so," replied Lady Sackville. "But why do you thus start from one topic to another?"

"Listen," continued Malvern, "hear what I have to say. You have heard that I am going to marry Florence. Have you likewise been told that I love her very, very dearly, and that not for worlds would I wrong her or prove unfaithful to her in word or deed?"

"I honour you for these assurances," replied Venetia. "Rumour declares the Honourable Miss Eaton to be a most beautiful as well as amiable and excellent young lady, and I sincerely hope your marriage will be a happy one. But why have you turned the conversation upon this point?"

"Loving Florence as I do," returned Malvern, "and incapable of being faithless to her either in thought or deed, you might think it strange that I am sitting here addressing you in this familiar kind of style."

"And yet there is a sort of melancholy in your manner," returned Venetia. "I know full well, yes, indeed, I am convinced, that all you have been saying has a grave meaning, and is the prelude to something yet unsaid. I have already told you that I am very far from being offended with this frankness of tone in which you address me, and solemnly do I assure you that, though I know so little of you in reality, I feel as if we were long-standing acquaintances and old friends. It is this that makes me experience an interest in you, and wish you so much happiness with your betrothed. Did I not ere now say that I spoke to you of my accomplishments just as if it were friend speaking to friend?"

"No, you said sister talking to brother," interrupted Malvern. "You see that I am getting more and more

familiar. I scarcely think that I have once called you ' my lady ' or ' your ladyship ' during the present interview, and if I continue talking much longer, it is as likely as not I shall address you by your Christian name next."

" I must confess myself totally at a loss to understand the meaning which lies hid behind your words," and as Venetia spoke she fixed her eyes earnestly upon Malvern. " You are indeed incomprehensible. There is in your manner all the mournfulness arising from the recent funeral which has taken place — "

" Ah! then you heard that my father's remains had been found, and that they were interred the day before yesterday? "

" Yes, I saw a paragraph in the paper to that effect; and it is because I know how deep must be the shade of melancholy which the sad ceremony has left upon your mind," added Venetia, " that I am all the more at a loss to comprehend your present conduct. For that you are incapable of jesting or of jocularity under such circumstances — "

" Heaven forbid! " exclaimed Malvern, emphatically.

" Well, then, there is some strange meaning hidden beneath your words, and likewise concealed by your manner," continued Venetia. " Again I say that it seems to me as if you were preparing me for some revelation."

" Yes, I am. Are you prepared? " inquired Malvern, and he took her hand.

" Prepared for what? " asked Venetia. " You alarm me."

" It is as a brother speaking to a sister that I am now addressing you," resumed Malvern, " and methought it my duty to give you some little preparation. In a word, suppose that you and I were closely related? "

" But how is this possible? " exclaimed Venetia. " And yet I see by your manner that it is so. Moreover, you would not jest, you are incapable of jesting under such circumstances."

" I am serious, solemnly serious," replied Malvern. " We are related. In short, we owe our being to the same father, and you are my half-sister."

Lady Sackville was amazed at this announcement, which to her was incomprehensible. But Sir Valentine proceeded

to give her certain explanations which opened her eyes to the comprehension of many mysteries, and which fully confirmed the statement he had made. This is not, however, the place to lay these explanations before the reader. They will be given in due course, and in the interval a requisite amount of patience must be exercised.

"But tell me, Valentine, tell me candidly," said Lady Sackville, when their long conference was nearly brought to a termination, "do you not regret having found so near a relative in me? Oh, I feel that I am blushing as I look you in the face, for rumour with her thousand tongues cannot fail to have wafted to your ears the allegation that I am the mistress of the prince."

"I did not come hither to judge you," returned Valentine, "but to communicate an important secret. That communication has been made, and now it is for you to decide whether you wish to consider me as your brother, and whether I am to look upon you as a sister."

"Can you doubt that such is my wish?" asked Venetia, in a tone of gentle reproach.

"But remember," rejoined Malvern, "that, legally speaking, we are not related."

"No, for the stigma of illegitimacy rests upon me and my sister," replied Lady Sackville.

"Nevertheless," immediately observed Malvern, "so far as I am concerned, I cannot lose sight of the one solemn fact that the same father was the author of our being. Moreover, inasmuch as the late Sir Archibald Malvern deceived your mother, — alas, that I should have thus to speak of a father! — and sent her broken-hearted to an early grave, there is no possible atonement which I, as his eldest son and living representative, am not prepared to make on his behalf to you and to your sister, the neglected, unacknowledged children of that betrayed and broken-hearted mother. Therefore is it that I offer you and your sister a brother's love, a brother's fondness, and if you need it and will accept it, a brother's counsel likewise. I would even add, taking a more worldly view of the subject, that of the large fortune which I have inherited equal shares shall be placed at your disposal."

"So much goodness, so much generosity, overpowers me," murmured Venetia, melting into tears. Then suddenly wring-

ing her hands as a troop of bitter memories swept through her brain, she cried, "Oh, wherefore did I not know all this a year ago? It would have saved me from having become what I am."

"Then you are not happy, my dear sister?" asked Malvern, in a tone of the deepest interest.

"Valentine," returned Lady Sackville, "I should have been happier, far happier, had I remained virtuous. But it is now for me to give you certain explanations, and you will perceive that I am as much to be pitied as to be blamed. You know wherefore I came to London, and how bitterly, how cruelly, I was disappointed? This disappointment was the main cause that helped to place me in circumstances to the tide of which I was compelled to yield. I was hurried away by them — But listen, and I will give you the whole history in a continuous manner."

With these words Lady Sackville entered upon her explanations to the young baronet, and he listened with the deepest interest. She told him everything that had occurred to her during the first few months of her sojourn in London, — how she came to occupy Acacia Cottage, how she was led to marry Horace Sackville, and how they were elevated to the peerage and installed at Carlton House. She likewise told him various particulars relative to her sister, — that sister of whom they had ere now been speaking, and whom she represented as being engaged to marry a young nobleman of the highest character and the most exalted principles. But she did not explain to her half-brother how she had voluntarily abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, how she had been tricked into an amour with the Earl of Curzon, how she had been coerced by Colonel Malpas, and how circumstances had induced her to sell her charms to the Marquis of Leveson. No, all these profligacies and depravities she carefully concealed. She would sooner have perished than confess them; and as Valentine entertained not the faintest suspicion in those respects, there was no necessity to make such confessions. Therefore, with regard to the dark side of her character, he saw her only as the mistress of the prince, and he pitied her, he compassionated her, for by the tale which she had told him and which was perfectly true so far as it went, he saw that she had indeed been hurried on by the current of a destiny which few

women of even far stronger mind would have been able to resist, even supposing that a large amount of virtuous principle served as an auxiliary.

"And now do you not loathe and despise me?" asked Venetia, when she had concluded the explanations which she thought fit to give.

"No; as a brother I sympathize with you, I pity you," answered Valentine. "Were I your parent and had a right to speak with authority, I should say that I forgave you."

"Oh, you are all kindness," exclaimed Venetia, and she embraced him affectionately. "For Heaven's sake do not think that I am altogether depraved. No, nor is my husband. There have been moments when he and I have compared notes of our feelings, and have allowed all the sentiments and emotions of our better natures to assert their empire. He is not happy, nor am I. A year's experience of a court life has not wedded us to it."

"And you would leave it, you would abandon it?" exclaimed Malvern, joyfully. "At all events, my dear sister, you will withdraw yourself from this position of moral degradation? It is not too late for your husband and yourself to ensure your mutual happiness — But I see that this is not the moment to converse upon so serious a topic. Your mind is now under the influence of unusual feelings, excited by the revelation I have made to you, and you and I must have opportunities of serious and earnest discourse together. But your sister, our sister — "

"Ah, my sister!" echoed Venetia, and again she grew troubled.

"I would propose," continued Valentine, "that you and I should go together, as soon as convenient to yourself, and communicate the secret of her birth to our sister. Besides, I long to embrace her. You have drawn so delightful a portrait of her character that I am impatient to become acquainted with her. When, then, shall we go?"

"To-morrow," replied Venetia. "In the morning I will set off in my travelling-carriage, accompanied only by my maid, Jessica, who is my confidante, and knows pretty well all the circumstances of my life. Where will you join us?"

"At Blackheath," returned Malvern. "You will stop to change horses at the Green Man tavern, and I will be there in readiness to accompany you."

"Agreed," observed Venetia. "I shall start at nine o'clock to-morrow. At ten we shall meet at Blackheath."

They then separated, and when Sir Valentine was gone, Venetia fell into a profound reverie, during which she thought over all that had just taken place, and then she reflected upon the course which she should pursue for the future. But while she was still deliberating upon all the features of her position, — whether she could possibly extricate herself from its trammels, and if so, whether she should, — the door opened, and a domestic announced Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

CHAPTER XII

NATURE'S BETTER FEELINGS

THE baronet, as the reader is well aware, was a particular favourite with Venetia. She certainly liked him, and she was just in that mood on the present occasion when his company would prove agreeable. She had too many unpleasant things on her mind to bear thinking of long, and she was therefore well pleased at a visit thus calculated to distract her thoughts from gloomy ponderings.

"My dear Venetia," began Sir Douglas, sweeping his eyes around to assure himself that they were alone, otherwise he would not have addressed her in such a familiar manner, "it is a perfect age since I saw you last. Several long weeks, I declare. But you are as radiant and as beautiful as ever — no, not quite so radiant, for methinks that the smile now upon your features looks as if it were chasing away a recent gloom," and he embraced her as he spoke.

"Now, that is only a kiss of friendship, mind," she exclaimed, archly.

"And why not of love?" he inquired, placing himself by her side upon the sofa.

"Because I have been very seriously thinking that I shall turn over a new leaf," answered Lady Sackville.

"And that meditation has made you serious? But a new leaf in what?"

"In my conduct. You really must acknowledge, my dear Douglas, that I have been a very naughty, wicked creature."

"What, for allowing me at one time to bask in the sunlight of your smiles?" exclaimed Huntingdon. "As for your intimacy with the prince, the world does not make it a reproach to you, and where the world sees no harm, what is the use of your repining?"

" Do you not think that there can be more true happiness in a life of virtuous enjoyment and quiet contentment? " asked Venetia, half-serious, half-smiling.

" If you were less beautiful than you are," returned the baronet, " one would be apt to think you had experienced some slight or neglect that made you look with a jaundiced eye upon the pleasures, the dissipations, and the gaieties of a court life."

" And may not those pleasures themselves become insipid? " asked Venetia.

" Truly so," was Huntingdon's response. Then, after a little hesitation, he said, " I have a very great mind to make you a confession, Venetia."

" Do. I am so fond of being made a confidante."

" But I am afraid you will laugh at me."

" No," rejoined the lady, " for I can already anticipate what you desire to tell me."

" Do guess, then," exclaimed the baronet. " It will save me, perhaps, some embarrassment, if you will interpret my feelings for me."

" Well, then, I will try," said Venetia. " You are in love."

" Yes, with you. That you have known all along."

" No, I do not mean that," continued Lady Sackville. " You are no more in love with me than I am with you. We like each other, we experienced a transitory passion for each other," she added, with a slight blush, " but that is all. What I mean is, you are in love with that Ariadne Varian of whom you have before spoken to me."

" And suppose that I told you that I was," observed Sir Douglas, " and that I had come frankly and candidly to consult you as a friend? "

" I should say that I felt gratified and pleased with your confidence," answered Venetia, " and that, experiencing a real interest in your welfare, I should give you the best possible advice."

" Well, I think that I must unbosom myself altogether to you," resumed Sir Douglas. " Besides, you once before, when speaking of Ariadne, counselled me to follow the bent of my own inclinations. The truth is, Venetia, I am tired of the life I have been leading, and, like you, I am anxious to turn over a new leaf. As a matter of course, you are well

aware that my habits have been somewhat of the most dissipated cast, and that I have indulged a little too freely in the juice of the grape. I know that I have partially injured my constitution, but, thank God, as yet I have neither got a red nose nor bleared eyes; still, I look pale — "

"You look better than I have seen you for a long time past," interrupted Venetia. "So far from being pale, there is a little colour upon your cheeks, an appearance of health which I never beheld there before."

"Ah! I am delighted to hear you say this," exclaimed the baronet. "The truth is, I was fishing for your opinion on the point, and you have given it to me. Well, I do feel much better in health and also in spirits than I have done for some time. But I will tell you how it happened. A little time ago I began to feel so queer that I got alarmed. I always awoke in the morning with a nausea at the stomach, and my hand trembled so that I could not shave myself. Pardon such details; they are not perhaps overdelicate, but you and I are friends. So I may add that I was compelled to take a glass of brandy to put my stomach in order, and then a glass of curaçoa to steady my hand, and then a tumbler of hock and soda-water to quench the heat which the alcohol had excited. Unless I did all this, I could not begin the day, and, as it was, I seldom ate any breakfast. Altogether, I was getting regularly out of sorts, and began to entertain serious alarms lest death was coming upon me apace."

"Do not talk in so shocking a manner," interrupted Venetia. "Death! I have never thought of it yet," she added, with a slightly perceptible shudder.

"Well, it is not a subject for a splendid drawing-room, with the sun shining in gloriously at the open casement, and with the zephyr wafting around us the perfume of all the delicious flowers on the terrace outside. But shall I go on with my own story?"

"Yes, assuredly. Do not make it too gloomy," said Venetia, now smiling again.

"I will not. To be brief," continued Sir Douglas, "I resolved upon consulting my worthy and excellent friend, Doctor Corpperas, and to him I went. He listened to me with true professional knowingness. When I had explained all I felt, he shook his head gravely. 'We live too fast, my dear Sir Douglas,' he said. 'We pay too much homage to

Bacchus, and not enough to Æsculapius. We have no business to take brandy, curaçoa, and hock with soda-water of a morning; much less ought we to go to bed in a state of obfuscation four nights out of the seven. We are knocking nails in our coffin; we are killing ourselves rapidly. We must turn over a new leaf.' All this was very sage and very sapient, no doubt, and I could not help agreeing with the great physician. In fact, I had come to the very same conclusions myself before I visited him. He went on with a long tirade, which I do not, however, mean to inflict upon you, my dear Venetia, but all that he said amounted to this: that I had certainly done myself a great deal of harm by dissipation, but that I possessed a constitution naturally strong, and that the evil was not beyond reparation; that I ought to go to the seaside and bathe, give up drinking almost entirely, live upon mutton, roast or boiled, and go to bed early; and that if I would do all this, I should soon see the beneficial results. He however added that he thought it just as well I should have another opinion on the subject, as he did not like me to act solely on his responsibility. I accordingly asked whom he would recommend me to consult, whereupon he declared that it did not much matter; any eminent physician would do, but if there were one who, amongst all, had devoted himself to the effects of hard living upon the human constitution, that man was the far-famed and the very celebrated Doctor Thurston."

"And what did you do then?" asked Venetia.

"Oh, of course I went to Doctor Thurston," continued the baronet, in his half-serious, half-jocular manner. "The same scene was enacted all over again, with very trifling alterations. For Doctor Thurston declared that it was by no means necessary to have come to him since I had received the advice of such an able, eminent, and highly talented physician as Doctor Copperas, but that since his (Doctor Thurston's) opinion was asked, he could only say he fully coincided with every tittle of the suggestions offered by Doctor Copperas, with the trifling difference, perhaps, that in addition to mutton boiled and roasted, I might sometimes take it broiled in the shape of chops. Accordingly, I went away highly gratified that these two learned men so nearly coincided with each other, and of course I thought it a libel upon the profession to talk about doctors differing."

"And you followed the advice?" said Venetia.

"Pretty closely," returned the baronet. "I went down to the seaside, made a vow to leave off drinking a single thing in the shape of alcohol till dinner-time, and then only six glasses of wine. I missed my usual quantum terribly at first, but soon grew accustomed to the regimen. I took sea-baths and plenty of exercise, and went to bed at ten o'clock regularly. But as for the mutton, roast, broiled, and boiled, I must confess that I varied those dainties with a piece of beef, a chicken, and a little fish, for if there be one thing that I hate more than another it is sheep in any shape, roast, boiled, or broiled. However, I feel my health and my spirits so wonderfully improved that nothing could induce me to exceed my six glasses of wine after dinner; and as for tempting me to drink anything before dinner, why, I can assure you, my dear Venetia, that if there were wine now moistening your dewy lips, I would not kiss them. But as there is not, I will," and he suited the action to the word.

"You are faithless to Ariadne Varian," said Venetia, laughing. "Besides, I can assure you, on my honour, that I am seriously determined to reform myself, and all that you have just told me proves how easily it can be done if a proper effort be only made. To speak without a jest, I tell you candidly, my dear Douglas, that, entertaining a very sincere friendship for you, I am delighted at everything you have told me. And now I wish to hear the conclusion of your confessions."

"What more have I to confess?" asked the baronet, smiling.

"Why, your feelings relative to Ariadne. Oh, I can read the human heart more easily, perhaps, than you think. Shall I tell you something about yourself?"

"Yes, pray do," exclaimed the baronet. "Proceed. I enjoy the liveliness of this conversation amazingly."

"Then, listen," resumed Venetia. "At the time all those strange things happened some months ago relative to Ariadne Varian, she made a deep impression upon your heart, but you did not choose at once to acknowledge that you had fallen headlong in love with the sister of a common clerk. When you had provided for her and her brother with the most noble generosity, you rarely went near the home you had given them. You tried to wean yourself from

contemplating her image, you thought it was a fantasy that would pass; perhaps you even plunged more deeply into the vortex of dissipation, to escape from it. But all would not do. You at length perceived that the sentiment with which she had inspired you was stronger and more durable than you fancied. While at the seaside you have had greater leisure for reflection, and this reflection has been pursued with a brain less clouded than heretofore. You have been dwelling upon the innocence, beauty, and amiability of Ariadne; you have perhaps even reproached yourself for neglecting her, because you have seen how worthy she was of your attention. At last you have come to the conclusion that she is necessary to your happiness, and now the only struggle which remains is to conquer the false pride that still lurks in a dark corner of your soul. But, on the other hand, you do feel all the pride of a man who, having reformed his own conduct, has rendered himself worthy of approaching an innocent and stainless damsel with the overtures of affection. Ah! believe me, my dear friend, this latter is a very honourable pride and does you infinite credit. Shall it not subdue, then, that other sentiment of pride, so false and hollow, which makes you hesitate to hasten and offer your hand to Ariadne? "

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed in mingled astonishment and delight upon Venetia as she thus spoke. Never had she appeared so enchantingly beautiful in his eyes, for she was radiant with the satisfaction of knowing that she was giving the most friendly counsel and pleading on behalf of an excellent girl. But it was no longer with a sensuous feeling that the baronet now surveyed her; it was with a purer and holier emotion than he perhaps had ever before experienced or she had ever before inspired.

" Venetia, there is something noble in your character, after all," he exclaimed, unable to repress this utterance of his thoughts. " You are not the mere woman of the world, the mere court beauty, but you possess a heart. I declare solemnly that there are in you the elements of great goodness, but you have been spoiled by the artificialities, the temptations, and the vain scenes in the midst of which you have been flung. I do really and truly love you now, but not as I have before told you that I loved you. No, now I admire and esteem you," and taking her hand, he did not touch it

with his lips, but he pressed it in the fervid warmth of friendship.

"Have I interpreted all your feelings aright?" she asked, much moved by the present scene.

"Yes, in every detail," he responded. "I could not have fathomed my own heart so nicely, so delicately, and so accurately as you have probed it for me. But is it not strange that you and I should be conversing in such a manner? Who would believe that the gay and brilliant Lady Sackville and the dissipated Douglas Huntingdon could thus have settled their attention upon serious matters, ay, and with the most genuine sincerity into the bargain? But it is so."

"Assuredly, on my part," said Venetia. "But are you quite confident that, now you are returned to London, you will not yield to its temptations and relapse into the vortex of pleasure?"

"No, it is impossible," exclaimed the baronet. "I can assure you that although ere now I may have spoken jocularly and good-humouredly of my alarms relative to my own case and of my visits to the physicians, yet that I was too much frightened at the time ever to run such foolish risks again. A man must be mad to trifle with his own health, for, after all, health is the greatest of blessings. I should loathe myself if I had not sufficient command over my inclinations, after the experiences I have gleaned, to be able to conquer any desire for a recurrence to the delights of dissipation. Venetia, I can assure you, in all solemn seriousness," he added, fixing his eyes with steady earnestness and frank sincerity upon her, "that I am an altered man. I regarded you as a friend, I liked you, and I could not help coming to tell you all this. Only, in the first instance, I did not exactly know how to make the confession, and I was somewhat afraid of ridicule. But you have generously, and I may almost say unexpectedly, come to my help; you have given an interpretation to my feelings in the most liberal and enlightened sense, and I sincerely thank you. Shall we not always continue the very best of friends?"

"We will," answered Venetia, with evident sincerity. "And now tell me what is to be Ariadne's fate?"

"Immediately upon quitting you, I shall proceed to her abode," replied the baronet, "and shall offer her my hand."

"You are resolved to do this?"

"I am fully resolved. Even if my own heart had not suggested the determination, your pleadings relative to that amiable girl would have been sufficient."

"Now go, then," said Venetia. "You are bent upon so excellent an errand that it is a sin to detain you here. Besides, without knowing Ariadne, I nevertheless entertain the belief, considering all that has taken place between you, that she must love you. A young girl, whose heart was previously disengaged, could not become with impunity the heroine of so many wildly romantic adventures as those in which she figured with you as the hero. For you remember that you told me everything relative to the incidents at the hut near Shooter's Hill, and also your rescuing her from your burning house — But go; I will not detain you."

"Farewell for the present," said the baronet, taking Venetia's hand, which he once more pressed cordially.

"Farewell, and may all happiness attend you," she answered; and they separated, with merely this clasping of the hand, and with no more embracings.

The scene had a most beneficial influence upon Venetia's mind. Following so closely upon her interview with Sir Valentine Malvern, it was chastening and salutary. It touched many of those better feelings of her nature which had long slumbered in the depths of her soul, but were not altogether destroyed. She felt, too, that she had behaved well in the counsel which she had given Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and she was satisfied with herself.

Wishing to commune with her thoughts in perfect freedom from the chances of interruption, she descended from the drawing-room and passed into the garden belonging to the palace. She entered upon the terrace to which Sir Douglas had alluded during his visit, and leaning over the slight iron railing which fenced it, she looked down upon a charming parterre of flowers beneath. With her eyes fixed upon them, she grew pensive, and yet no shade of mournfulness was upon her features. She thought how pleasant a thing it was to be beautiful and to afford pleasure by the existence of such beauty; and she went on to reflect how loathsome would be those flowers if their lovely petals were to distil poison instead of honey. Then she said to herself, "And I, too, am beautiful. But, oh, how happy should I be if my

loveliness had never proved the source of poison to my thoughts. Is it too late to reform? Is it not possible for me yet to enjoy real happiness in this world? "

And then she meditated long and earnestly upon a subject so fraught with vital importance to herself. But a cold shudder crept over her when she remembered through what deep mire of pollutions she had been dragged, how she had passed through the arms of five persons in addition to her husband; and now, indeed, did a dark shade of sadness fall upon her lovely countenance, while the crystal tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly she felt a hand laid upon her shoulder, but so profoundly had she been absorbed in her reflections that she had heard the sound of no footstep advancing. Starting quickly, she turned and beheld her husband.

" What, in tears, Venetia? " he exclaimed, " and in the midst of a scene so bright and beautiful as this, and with the golden sunbeams playing around you! "

" Horace," she answered, " a singular change has come over me. But I can tell you nothing now. You must not question me. To-morrow I am going out of town to pass a day or two with my sister. On my return I will tell you everything, and perhaps — perhaps," she added, falteringly, " you and I may have some very serious discourse together."

With these words she hurried away, leaving her husband transfixed to the spot and gazing after her in silent wonderment.

CHAPTER XIII

SCENES IN THE DANE JOHN

The reader's attention must now be again directed to Canterbury. It was on the same day and at the same hour — that is to say, at noon — when the preceding incidents took place that the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, minor canon of the cathedral, was walking to and fro in the beautiful shady avenue of trees in the Dane John. He was in a deep reverie, but his thoughts were bent upon no topic fitting for a minister of the gospel. On the contrary, he was brooding over a passion that was devouring him. Against this passion had he struggled with great efforts, but it was stronger than himself. He had allowed his imagination to dwell upon it until it had become his master. The object of his passion was Louisa Stanley.

About ten months had elapsed since he had committed that outrage which has already been so fully described. The reader will remember how Bernard Audley had Louisa carried off by hireling wretches, — gipsies, indeed, whose services he had engaged for the purpose, how she had contrived to escape from his house, how he had overtaken her in the crypt of the cathedral, and how, at the moment when she was about to succumb to his power, a tall female form dressed in black had sprung forward and rescued her from his clutches. It will likewise be remembered how she was conveyed home in a carriage by Bernard Audley and this female, and how she was induced to pass the matter over in silence in consequence of the letter, full of entreaty, which that same female had written to her. Nevertheless she had, as in duty bound, explained the circumstance to Jocelyn Loftus, who had called upon the minor canon on the following morning, and warned the unprincipled clergyman against

a renewal of his persecution in respect to an amiable, innocent, and excellent young lady. From that time the Reverend Audley Bernard had left Louisa altogether unmolested; indeed, he himself had been for some while absent from Canterbury, doubtless pursuing his profligacies in secret elsewhere. But whithersoever he went, and no matter into what scenes he plunged, still was he followed by the image of the beautiful Louisa. He was continually picturing her to himself, and thus did the fury of his passion grow upon him.

It was indeed a fury. Nothing of love's softness was there in his heart, but the craving of fierce desire; no tender, beaming light shining as a heavenly halo, but the lurid glow and devouring candescence of a volcano. Thus, when he dwelt upon her image, it was not to admire and to worship, but to gloat upon it with lustful ardour. And now, within the last few weeks, he had returned to Canterbury, and on two or three occasions had he seen Louisa in company with Mary Owen, when the two young ladies walked out together. Mary herself was sweetly pretty, as we have already described, but the minor canon scarcely noticed her at all, so entirely was her beauty outshone by the transcending loveliness of Louisa. The reader cannot have forgotten how matchless indeed were the graces and how inimitable the charms which combined to render Louisa Stanley the most heavenly of earthly beings. Not tall, but so exquisitely shaped, with a sylphid slenderness of figure, and a statuesque modelling of the bust, which was properly full without being voluptuously exuberant, she seemed taller than she really was; and while her step had all the elastic lightness of youth, her bearing was replete with maidenly elegance. The spirit of innocence and truthfulness seemed, as it were, to shine through her. Her dark brown hair, so rich and luxuriant, appeared the velvet drapery that flowed about the alabaster throne of her forehead, where candour and chastity made their chosen seat. Artlessness and innocence were in the expression of her bright coral lips, and in the deep blue eyes, fringed with their long dark lashes. Altogether, she was a being to be loved with the purest and holiest affection, and assuredly it was no fault of hers if in the bad heart of the minor canon her image had inspired so impure a flame.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. It was midday,

and Bernard Audley was walking to and fro in the Dane John. His thoughts were fixed absorbedly upon the image of Louisa Stanley. He had seen her an hour previously entering a shop in Canterbury, and accompanied by the young lady whom on former occasions he had observed in her society, and whom indeed he had accidentally learned to be a Miss Owen. This young lady was now in deep mourning, and her countenance wore a look of the profoundest melancholy. But few and transient were the thoughts which the minor canon bestowed upon her; whereas, on the other hand, deeper and more gloating than ever was the concentration of all his interest on the image of Louisa Stanley.

He had not ventured to accost her, he had even kept at a distance; but the brief view which he had obtained of her graceful form, with the elegant feet and ankles tripping glancingly over the threshold of the shop which he saw her enter, had at once fired his imagination to a maddening degree. He had watched till she and her companion came forth again. At a distance, and unperceived by them, had he followed as they retraced their way back to the cottage, which they never left for more than an hour or two at a time, and having kept them in sight until they had traversed the Dane John in their walk homeward, he had remained there, not daring to follow them any farther. But why dare he not? It was because the unhappy man felt himself irresistibly impelled to draw nearer and nearer to the two young ladies, and he knew that if he continued to yield to this impulse he should be urged to overtake them altogether and address himself to Louisa, despite the many reasons which warned him against such a course. For the moment, then, he had thus far resisted the temptation, thus far wrestled against the power that was impelling him on. But the effort was fearful, and the fury of the inward fire was fanned rather than mitigated.

"That girl unconsciously and innocently exercises an empire over me which will yet drive me to folly and to crime!" It was thus he mused within himself, and his countenance was marked with the strong lines of a raging passion, so that, handsome though it were, it looked dark, sinister, and repulsive to a degree at this moment. "Oh, to possess her, oh, for one hour of her love, and I would give ten years of my life. I cannot live thus. It seems written in the

book of destiny that I am to ruin myself, body and soul, here and hereafter, for that girl. Well, and she is worth a crime. Ah! no, not to dare death, not to dare the scaffold, for a few brief minutes of frenzied enjoyment. But if it were possible to clasp her, naked and glowing, in these arms, and to know that for hours, throughout a whole night, it were mine to revel in her beauties, that were a paradise worth any risk. Fool that I am thus to allow my passions to obtain such mastery over me. What, shall I peril everything, station, fortune, even my very life, for this girl? No, no; it were a madness, utter, utter folly."

And, as if to escape from his thoughts, he quickened his pace and hurried along the avenue; but still the image of Louisa was uppermost in his mind, and his heated imagination pictured to itself all that she must be when denuded of her vesture. Thus did he in fancy gloat over her charms, and plunging deeper and deeper down into the fevered dream, he felt as if he were revelling in those beauties which he thus delineated to his conception.

"Oh, I shall go mad, I shall go mad!" he exclaimed aloud, suddenly stopping short. "Yes, unless, indeed, I can either tear the image of Louisa Stanley forth from my soul or else procure the gratification of my desires."

At this moment he was startled by a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens close by, but looking hastily around, he saw no one. Indeed, at that particular time there did not appear to be any person in the avenue save himself.

"It was nothing," he said, still speaking aloud, but being unconscious as it were, that he thus gave audible vent to his musings. Then, as he slowly walked onward, he exclaimed in the excitement of a desperate resolve, "By Heaven! I will possess her, happen what may."

With these words he suddenly turned back, and retracing his way along the avenue, proceeded at a quick rate in the direction of the cottage where Louisa Stanley dwelt with her bedridden aunt and Mary Owen. Not that he had any settled purpose in view, but he was impelled by the mastery of his passions to hasten toward the cottage, and watch from some convenient hiding-place to see whether Louisa Stanley should issue forth again this day, in which case he had made up his mind to address her. But what did he propose to say? What did he purpose to do? Was the bold, bad man so

maddened, so blinded, or so besotted with the fury of his unfortunate passion as to believe that either by entreaty or by threat he could impart any of its fire to the chaste and stainless bosom of the charming Louisa? No, he did not think this; and again we say, that he had no settled purpose in view, but he was impelled toward Louisa's abode by that strong tide of passion to which he had now abandoned himself, and which was almost as strong as destiny itself.

Scarcely had he quitted the Dane John when from behind that thick group of evergreens where he had heard the rustling, and which were impenetrable to the eye, a tall female in black came forth. Her countenance was pale even to ghastliness, the traces of deep sorrows were upon her features, and yet the great beauty which had once marked that countenance was not altogether extinguished. The dark eyes still flashed with strange fires, and the pale quivering lips revealed teeth which were fine and in good preservation. Her age was about forty, though she looked three or four years older; but her hair was unstreaked with silver and her form, though very thin, was perfectly erect. Her apparel, consisting of deep black, was of good but not of costly material, and altogether there was an air about her which showed that she had been well bred, and at one time in her life accustomed to good society.

"That man whom I love, despite of all his cruelty toward me," she murmured to herself, as she emerged from the evergreens and looked in the direction where Bernard Audley had just disappeared through the iron gate at the farther extremity of the avenue, "and he calls me his evil genius! It is true that I seldom appear before him save when it is necessary to rescue him from some new crime, or prevent him from making new victims. Ah! although I have from time to time thus started up, as it were, in his presence, and rushed betwixt himself and the object of his lust, yet does he little suspect how constantly and how unweariedly I follow him about. And now again do his passions madly impel him to rush upon destruction. But I must save him, yes, and save also that sweet creature, the broken-hearted Melissa's daughter, whom he would thus immolate to his frenzied desires."

While she was thus musing, the lady became aware that some one was advancing from behind. She mechanically

turned and beheld another lady, also dressed in deep black, and also with a profound shade of mournfulness upon her countenance. She was about forty-six years old and possessed the remains of a beauty that must have once been truly splendid. She was still a very fine woman, stout and portly, with a commanding air that was natural to her, and which was visible enough despite her mourning garments and the sorrow of her looks.

The lady in black whom we represented as having emerged from the evergreens gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of astonishment on beholding this other lady who had just entered the avenue, and whom she evidently recognized. Then, as the attention of the latter was at once drawn by this ejaculation toward her who had uttered it, the recognition was instantaneously mutual.

"Anne!" exclaimed the one who had emerged from the evergreens.

"Lilian!" said the other, who was indeed Mrs. Owen, of Richmond. "Is it you?"

"Yes, it is I, Anne, your unhappy sister, the victim of Bernard Audley," responded Lilian Halkin, for such was the name of her whom in previous parts of the history we have denominated the lady in black.

Then the sisters took each other's hand in a melancholy and remorseful manner, as if this present meeting irresistibly carried their memories back to long past years, over which they retrospected with regret; and though there was something tender and pathetic in the way in which they held each other's hand and gazed upon each other's countenance, they did not embrace. There was no enthusiastic joy in the meeting, but a profound melancholy; and as they thus surveyed each other and mutually marked the changes which time had wrought in their appearance since last they met many years ago, it was easy to read in their looks how deeply at that instant went the conviction in unto their souls that their lives had not been such as they ought to have been, and that it would prove but a mournful and regretful task to compare notes in that respect with each other.

"And you recognized me at once, Lilian?" said Mrs. Owen.

"Yes. But you, should you have recognized me had

your attention not been drawn toward me by the cry that I uttered on meeting you here? "

" I should have known you, Lilian; but you are greatly altered," answered Mrs. Owen, still surveying her sister with a mournful interest.

" Ah! it is not so much the lapse of time," answered Lilian, shaking her head slowly and sorrowfully, " as blighted love and the consciousness of crime."

" Crime? " ejaculated Mrs. Owen, with a shudder. " Then it was true? Heavens! do not say so, Lilian."

" Yes, alas, too true," responded the unhappy woman. Then sweeping her eyes up and down the avenue to assure herself that there were no observers and no listeners, she said, " Too true, indeed. The poor innocent, in a paroxysm of frenzy I killed it."

" Oh, but it was not deliberately done? " Mrs. Owen hastened to observe, anxious to suggest an excuse for her sister's crime, even though it should be an imaginary palliation.

" Heavens, no! I was wild and mad at the moment," cried Lilian. Then, in a slower and more solemn voice, she added, " But the crime is not the less rankling here," and she laid her hand upon her heart. " Though acquitted through a flaw in the indictment, how could I show my face to those again who knew me? No, not even to my own sisters dared I appear."

" And yet, Lilian, we cast you not off," observed Mrs. Owen; " for neither I nor Melissa were prudes, and Lydia was too good, too virtuous, too noble-hearted, not to have received you with open arms."

" I dare say you have long thought me dead? " said Lilian, in a melancholy tone, and after a pause.

" I feared so. What else could I think? But what of Lydia? Have you ever obtained any tidings of her? What has become of her? " asked Mrs. Owen.

" She lives, and to say that she lives," replied Lilian, " is to express the very outside."

" What mean you? " demanded Mrs. Owen, with mingled impatience and astonishment.

" I mean," was the response, " that our sister Lydia is alive, but that she is utterly unconscious of everything which passes around her. Paralysis has for three years past

stretched her helpless, deprived of speech, and with the light of the mind's lamp extinguished within her."

"Heavens! what do I hear?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "But where does she dwell? Who tends upon her? In what circumstances is she placed? What has become of Melissa's children?"

"One is with her," answered Lilian; "the other is, I believe, in London, but I know not where or for what purpose."

"But where dwells our afflicted sister? Under what name?" inquired Mrs. Owen, painfully excited.

"Under the name of Stanley —"

"Stanley!" ejaculated Mrs. Owen, almost reeling with the amazement that now struck her. "What, in a cottage somewhere in the suburbs — this way?" and she pointed in the proper direction.

"Ah! you know it then?" exclaimed Lilian, now equally struck with surprise.

"I am going thither at this moment," answered Mrs. Owen. "They offered me a guide at the hotel, but I preferred proceeding thither alone, in order that I might compose my thoughts, or, rather, prepare them for an interview of a very, very painful character."

"Ah! I begin to understand," cried Lilian. "I had heard that a Miss Owen was staying with Louisa Stanley, but it never once struck me that she was your daughter. And is it so?"

"Yes, it is so. But surely these young girls," added Mrs. Owen, in a musing tone, "cannot have discovered that they are, as it were, related, that they would be cousins, if their births were legitimate. No, it is impossible."

"And you are going, then, to the cottage?" said Lilian, still gazing in amazement upon her sister, but not heeding her last remarks.

"Do you know what has happened, Lilian?" asked Mrs. Owen, now bursting into tears. "Are you aware of the dreadful things which have occurred on the Continent?"

"At Geneva? Yes. I read it all in the newspapers, and I knew full well that those were your daughters. I remembered the Christian names of the two eldest, Agatha and Emma, but the third, and this one that is now staying with Miss Stanley, were born after you and I ceased to see each

other. I never knew their Christian names. Alas! poor Anne, you are now in mourning, as I have been during many, many long years, for when I had passed through the terrible ordeal of a trial for murder," — and the unhappy lady shuddered visibly as she spoke, — " I recorded a solemn vow that sable garments should clothe me until the day of my death. My heart was destined to be in mourning from the instant that the last cry of my dying child rang through my brain, and I resolved that in mourning weeds also should my body continue wrapped until laid in the cold tomb."

" But how have you lived? Where have you been for so many, many years? " asked Mrs. Owen.

" Oh, I see, my dear Anne," exclaimed Lilian, " that we have much, very much, to say to each other; and you are doubtless anxious to behold your daughter."

" Yes, if she will pardon me," murmured Mrs. Owen, again melting into tears. " For it was my wickedness which has led to this fearful catastrophe at Geneva; it was I who placed my poor daughters in that career which has led to such awful consequences. One murdered by the assassin's knife, the other two hopeless idiots in a madhouse."

" Ah! but is it possible that you were the cause? " exclaimed Lilian, shrinking back aghast. " Is it of such horrors that you accuse yourself? "

" All too true! " rejoined Mrs. Owen, her voice convulsed with sobs.

" But in what career of wickedness were they placed? " asked Lilian. " The newspapers, as you must be aware, gave the most meagre outline of the particulars, — little more, indeed, than a bare narrative of the catastrophe itself."

" Because such grave matters and important interests were concerned therein," answered Mrs. Owen, " that the journals dared not chronicle all that transpired. However, upon this point I will tell you more when we meet again."

" But where shall we meet again, and when? " asked Lilian.

" Where do you live? " inquired Mrs. Owen. " I am for the moment staying at the Fountain Hotel; but I propose to take Mary with me, if she will return to that mother

whose crimes have been so great, and proceed with her to the Continent, to visit Geneva and see her poor sisters."

"My home is for the present," answered Lilian, "at a humble peasant's cottage a few miles hence."

"But have you never been to see your poor sister Lydia?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"Never," replied Lilian. "After the frightful thing which happened to me years ago, I vowed that I would never go near my sisters again, much less her who was pure and virtuous and good."

"But there are vows, my dear Lilian, which ought not to be kept," said Mrs. Owen, "and this is one. Had you been faithful to that oath, you would not have accosted me just now."

"Ah! but I was so taken by surprise, so amazed, at seeing you here," said Lilian Halkin.

"But you will not persevere any longer in thus absenting yourself from the bedside of a sister who is so cruelly afflicted?" urged Mrs. Owen.

"Perhaps I should long ago have forgotten my vow and flown to that cottage," said Lilian, "but how could I proclaim myself to be the sister of her who passes by the name of Miss Stanley without also being compelled to embrace the young and innocent Louisa as a niece? Then what questions would she put to me, and what could I say? How account for never having been thither before? No, it is impossible."

"And yet," returned Mrs. Owen, "I am about to visit that cottage; and, after all that you have told me, I must announce myself as the poor bedridden Miss Stanley's sister, and consequently as Louisa's aunt. And yet perhaps," she exclaimed, as a sudden idea struck her, an idea from which she recoiled aghast, "my own daughter Mary may have whispered in the ears of her young friend Louisa such things concerning her mother as to prejudice that excellent girl against me."

"Then, under all circumstances, pause and reflect," said Lilian, earnestly, "as to the course you will adopt. Go and fetch your daughter away, but make no revelation to Louisa to-day. Appear before her only as Mrs. Owen, the mother of Mary. Then, when alone with your daughter, you can ascertain from her lips to what extent her revelations may

have prejudiced the young and artless Louisa against you. For, oh, let us not mar that sweet girl's happiness by announcing ourselves to her as relations whom she cannot love and for whom she must blush."

"Lilian, you have spoken wisely," said Mrs. Owen, "and I will follow your advice. To-day I shall have a long and serious discourse with my daughter Mary. Will you come to me to-morrow at the hotel, and we will confer further how to act."

"Yes, I will visit you some time in the course of to-morrow," replied Lilian. "Till then adieu, my dear sister."

"Adieu," said Mrs. Owen, and ere they parted they kissed each other.

Mrs. Owen then continued her way toward the cottage, in pursuance of the directions which she had received in answer to the inquiries made at the hotel.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Having experienced no difficulty in finding the cottage, Mrs. Owen opened the little garden gate, and was advancing up to the front door, when an ejaculation of surprise not unmixed with joy thrilled through the open casement of the parlour, and in another instant Mary Owen came bounding forth and threw herself into her mother's arms. She was in deep mourning, as we have already stated, and therefore Mrs. Owen saw at once that she was no stranger to the catastrophe which had occurred at Geneva. But that Mary would have already learned the particulars of that dire tragedy, she had foreseen from her knowledge of the fact that Jocelyn Loftus, who was Louisa's lover, and of course in correspondence with her, was at Geneva at the time it occurred.

"My dearest Mary," murmured Mrs. Owen, in a voice well-nigh suffocated with emotions, "can you, will you forgive your unhappy mother?"

"O heavens! do you ask me such a question?" cried Mary, as the tears rained down her cheeks. "Are we not already sufficiently unhappy?"

"Let us step aside somewhere, that we may talk together," said Mrs. Owen, hastily, "for I have much to say to you ere I see that kind young lady who has given you an asylum."

"Come this way, my dear mother," said Mary, and taking her parent's hand, she led her along the gravel walk to an arbour in the remotest corner of the garden. Then, as they placed themselves upon the bench that was embowered with foliage, she said, "Here may we converse without restraint."

"Embrace me once more, my dear little Mary," said Mrs.

Owen. Then, as she strained her youngest daughter to her bosom, she cried, with much fervour, "Thank God for having preserved you to comfort me!"

For some minutes neither mother nor daughter could give utterance to another word, so profound was their grief, so convulsive were the sobs that rent their bosoms, so deluging were the tears that they shed. Again and again did Mrs. Owen clasp Mary in her arms, for the worldly-minded woman was fearfully chastened by the awful catastrophe in which her intrigues and machinations had plunged her other three children.

"And you tell me, Mary, that you can forgive me?" she said, at length. "Ah! it is a sad thing for a mother to be compelled to ask pardon of her daughter. But I know and I feel deeply, deeply, that I have been very wicked, that my conduct has been horrible —"

"Oh, my dear mother, speak not thus," interrupted Mary, lavishing the most tender caresses upon her wretched parent. "And yet in one sense I am overjoyed to hear you use such language. Forgetting the sad past so far as you yourself are concerned, I now feel that I have again a mother whom I can love and cherish."

"Mary, you possess the kindest of hearts," murmured Mrs. Owen, profoundly affected; and all this woman of the world's emotions were now as genuine and as sincere as for so many years of her life her hypocrisies had been well sustained. "But whenever you look upon me, shall you not shudder as you think that it was I who sent your sisters forth upon that fatal mission which has consigned one to an early grave and plunged the other two into mad-cells?"

"O Heaven! I cannot bear to think of it," cried Mary, with a strong shudder convulsing her entire frame. "But, ah! I charge not all this, my dearest mother, against you. Full well do I know that little indeed could you foresee so frightful a catastrophe."

"O God, no!" rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But now I ask you, Mary, will you be content to leave this peaceful asylum which was so generously granted you when compelled to fly from your own mother's care, will you return to this poor mother, now that she is bereaved, stricken down with the strong hand of affliction?"

"Oh, it is my duty to return to you," cried the young maiden, in a fervid tone.

"No, not even your duty, Mary," replied her mother, "for by my conduct have I severed every bond which ought to have linked us together. And to prove to you that I am not selfish now, but that in order to make all possible atonement for the past, I will consent to any sacrifice for the present or the future, I leave you entirely your own mistress, I exact nothing from you, I give you free permission to remain here under that hospitable roof where you have found a home."

"Oh, talk not thus, my dearest mother," exclaimed Mary. "It is not only my duty, but also my inclination to return to you, and to go with you wheresoever you may choose."

"Decide not too hastily," said Mrs. Owen. "I know, and deeply feel, how great my wickedness has been, and not the least portion of its punishment is the present humiliation which as a mother I endure before you, my daughter. Indeed, it will be a long, long time, ere I can look you in the face without shame, and never without remorse. For I shall think of how I would have sacrificed you to the same vile selfishness which has led to the awful catastrophe that has plunged us both into tears and mourning."

If Mary Owen did not interrupt her mother in the midst of this last speech, it was because she was too deeply convulsed with grief to be able to give utterance to a single word. But again did she throw herself into her parent's arms, and in broken sentences did she say, "Do not speak to me thus; I cannot bear it. Ah! my dear mother, for whatever you have done you are terribly punished, and it is now for me to do all I can to soothe and console. It will be a long, long day, dear mother, yes, a long, long day, ere you and I shall know happiness again. But still, still, we may have the satisfaction, the mournful satisfaction of mingling our tears together."

"Dearest Mary, you have already comforted me much," said Mrs. Owen, clasping the amiable girl passionately to her heart. "I scarcely hoped for such demonstrations of love and tenderness and filial devotion as these. It is far more than I deserve. But rest assured, dear Mary, that so long as I may be spared to you in this world will I prove as good a parent as I have hitherto been a bad one."

" What more can you say, my dear mother, or what more can I ask? " murmured Mary.

" But now tell me, my dearest child," resumed Mrs. Owen, after a long pause, " tell me to what extent that excellent young lady, Miss Louisa Stanley, has been prejudiced against me? I ought not to say prejudiced, because anything you may have told her I full well deserved — "

" Rest assured," interrupted Mary, " that I have spared my mother as much as possible in the communications I have made to Miss Louisa Stanley. Mr. Loftus knows more, far more, indeed, all; but, for many reasons, as such as it was possible to suppress was kept veiled from the knowledge of Louisa. Ah! I understand, my dear mother," Mary exclaimed, as a sudden idea struck her, " you are afraid that Louisa will not welcome you here as warmly as you would naturally wish? But she is the kindest-hearted, the most forgiving, and the most amiable being in existence; and if I only breathe a few words in her ear to say how sorry you are for all the past, and what tender things you have promised me for the future — But stay, my dear mother, do not move; I will return to you in a minute."

Thus speaking, the young damsel hurried away and reentered the cottage. In a few minutes she came forth again, accompanied by Louisa Stanley, and together did the two charming girls hasten to the spot where Mrs. Owen was seated. She rose, however, the moment Louisa was introduced by Mary into her presence, and then she saw at once, by the welcome which the amiable young lady gave her, that Mary's representations had indeed been as efficacious as she had predicted.

" Mrs. Owen, I need scarcely say how glad I am to find that my young friend Mary has at length regained a mother," and as Louisa thus spoke, with tears in her eyes, she offered Mrs. Owen her hand.

" But to you, dearest young lady, what boundless gratitude is due! " exclaimed Mrs. Owen. " I have not words to express all I feel," and she raised to her lips the hand which she clasped in her own. " You gave an asylum to my daughter when compelled to fly from her natural protectress."

" Oh, let us not talk of the past," cried Louisa, with amiable earnestness. " I know, madam, how deeply, deeply

you have been afflicted, — your garb proclaims that you are aware of the sad occurrence, — and whatever words may flow from my lips should rather be to console than to wound your heart. Again I say, therefore, let us draw a veil over everything that has gone by, so far indeed as it is possible. And now tell me, are you really going to take my dear Mary away from me immediately? "

" My dear Louisa, for so you must permit me to call you," said Mrs. Owen, " your own good sense and kind feeling will enable you to understand that there is a duty which Mary and I have to perform. In two or three days we must leave England," added Mrs. Owen, solemnly, " and repair to Geneva."

" Yes, I understand full well that you must proceed thither," observed Louisa. " When do you think of setting off? "

" In two or three days," repeated Mrs. Owen. " I will not be so unjust as to separate Mary from you altogether in a moment, for she loves you as dearly and as fondly as if you were her sister."

" And I love her equally in return," said Louisa, and the two amiable girls threw their arms around each other's waist and thus sat by Mrs. Owen's side upon the bench. " Will you not, my dear madam," continued our sweet heroine of the cottage, " remain here with me for the rest of this day? "

" Yes, Louisa, I cannot refuse your kind invitation," answered Mrs. Owen, " but I must take Mary away with me this evening, for, as you may suppose, we have many, many things to converse upon. To-morrow we shall come back again to visit you."

" Then you must remain here until the last moment to-night," said Louisa, in the warmth of generous hospitality toward Mrs. Owen and of affectionate friendship for Mary. " I shall not part with you till ten o'clock, and then the servant shall accompany you as far as your hotel and take such necessaries as Mary may want for her immediate use. Is this an arrangement? "

" It is," answered Mrs. Owen. " As frankly and cordially as the kind invitation is given, do I accept it."

" And now," said Louisa, " let Mary and me introduce you into the cottage. It is humble enough, but the welcome

I give you is all the more cordial on that account. Refreshments are now served up, and you must accompany us."

Thereupon the two young ladies led Mrs. Owen into the cottage.

Meanwhile the Reverend Bernard Audley, concealed behind the impenetrable verdure of the thick hedge which bordered the garden, had overheard every syllable of the preceding conversations. Not that he had cared much for what passed between Mrs. and Miss Owen, but the melody of Louisa's voice had sunk down like the most delicious music into the depths of his soul. Ah! if that divine harmony — for what harmony is more heavenly than the music of a lovely woman's fluid voice — had touched some generous chord in his heart, or had awakened the better feelings of his nature, happy should we be indeed to record the fact. But it was not so. Everything that was divine and pure and chaste and angelic about Louisa Stanley, in her look, her conduct, her gestures, or her voice, and which would have disarmed every other libertine in the world, only added fuel to the fire that raged in the breast of Bernard Audley. For the first time the lion did not sink down crouching and subdued in the presence of a virgin in her purity and her innocence.

Yes, all that had passed was overheard by the minor canon of Canterbury Cathedral, and as with greedy ears he drank in the details of that arrangement which was made relative to Mrs. Owen's stay until the evening, he felt a galvanic glow thrill through his veins as Satan whispered in his ear that the opportunity he coveted would then be within his reach. Hurrying away from the vicinage of the garden, he repeated the details of that arrangement to himself.

" Mrs. Owen and her daughter will stay until ten o'clock. They will then take their departure, accompanied by the maid servant. Lousia Stanley will remain alone in the cottage for at least an hour. Alone? Yes; for what is the old aunt, bedridden, dumb, and deprived of her senses? " and as he thus mused within himself he felt the devilish prompting again stir in the depths of his soul.

He sped away from the neighbourhood of the garden, not returning at once into Canterbury, but hurrying across the fields in order to be alone with his thoughts, so that he might

with less restraint ponder upon the course he had resolved to adopt, and feast his imagination with the triumph which he hoped to achieve.

"And, after all, why should I not dare everything?" he mused aloud. "Again and again do I declare that she is worthy any peril and any danger that it may be needful to run. Besides, when vanquished and subdued in my embrace, when dispossessed of the flower of her virginity, will she make known her shame to the world? Or will she cherish it as a secret not to be whispered even in the solitude of her own chamber, nor to be breathed even in a prayer to Heaven? Yes, she will shrink from the bare idea of proclaiming her disgrace. She will not risk the loss of her lover, whom she adores so fondly. It will be the first lesson which the now innocent and artless one must take in the ways of hypocrisy, — those ways in which all women become initiated sooner or later. Yes, and I will be her preceptor in the school of love's delights and duplicity's precautions."

The miscreant! he judged the rest of mankind by his own foul and polluted heart, and he formed his opinion of the female sex from those profligate creatures who, at various times, throughout his depraved career, had been the partners of his debauchery. His notions, too, were chiefly based upon his experiences in that aristocratic sphere to which he himself belonged, and amongst many of the female scions of which he had enjoyed great success, for his handsome person had been a great recommendation, and the sanctity of his profession as a minister of the gospel had rendered it safe, as it were, to intrigue with him. From all these circumstances his opinion of the female sex was not of the loftiest description, and the arguments which he used to confirm his resolve in attempting one last and (as he hoped) crowning outrage against Louisa Stanley, showed how little he was enabled to appreciate or understand the purity of that sweet maiden's soul. He did not forget that she had frankly communicated the former outrage to her lover Jocelyn, but then he thought to himself that she had adopted this course because of escaping pure and immaculate, and not having to blush in the presence of her admirer when making the revelation, much less having to fear that she would lose him altogether. Therefore Bernard Audley's argument was, that if her disgrace were utterly consummated,

then she would not dare make any confession to her lover, but would hush it up and lock the secret carefully in her own bosom. Heavens! how little, we repeat, did he understand that excellent girl!

While thus giving free vent to the thoughts that were hurrying him on toward the crime that he meditated and the risk which he endeavoured to palliate, he reached the Dane John once more by a circuitous route; and as he entered the avenue he was immediately confronted by Lilian Halkin, who rose from a seat half-embowered in the shade of the trees and the dense evergreens.

"Ah! is it you?" exclaimed Audley, an expression of mingled hatred and annoyance suddenly appearing upon his countenance. Then, as an idea flashed to his mind, and he recollected the rustling of the evergreens which had alarmed him in the midst of his soliloquy when in that same place a couple of hours previously, he said, "You have been watching me?"

"Yes, to save you from the perpetration of a crime that will plunge you into ruin," answered Lilian, in a voice that was firm and steady, though profoundly mournful.

"What crime? To what do you allude? How dare you address me thus?" demanded the minor canon, putting these questions for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent he might have committed himself, when so unguardedly speaking aloud, to the knowledge of her whom he considered his evil genius.

"Scarcely two hours have elapsed since in this very avenue you gave utterance to the wild ravings of your passions," and as Lilian thus spoke, she fixed her eyes with a look of steadfast warning and reproach upon the minor canon. "Louisa Stanley has inspired you with a frenzied love — no, not a love. That sacred name shall not be desecrated by being used in such a sense."

"You dare not say that I have conceived any evil design relative to Louisa Stanley," and Bernard Audley darted on Lilian Halkin a glance that was meant to read deep down into her soul.

"And you dare not deny the conception of such design," was her immediate response.

"At all events, I am not responsible to you for my conduct," he retorted, fiercely.

" Nor have you the power to prevent me from doing my best to save that innocent girl from your horrible machinations."

A dreadful expression of concentrated fury passed over the countenance of Bernard Audley, and he was about to give vent to some bitter words, perhaps even imprecations, but, checking himself, he said, in as mild a tone as he could possibly assume, " Lilian, why do you interfere with me? I do not like to threaten you, but you really provoke me beyond endurance. Do you forget that you are altogether dependent upon me — I will not say my bounty."

" Bounty! " she echoed, in a strange, wild voice, while her eyes flashed sudden fires. " Would you now taunt me with my dependence upon you for the morsel of bread that I eat? Think you that if you possessed all the treasures of the universe and were to lavish them upon me, you could compensate for that wreck of hopes which you have made and that blight of affections with which you have stricken me? There are moments when I hate you with a fiendish and malignant hatred, as much as at other times I still love you deeply and devotedly. But mark me well, Bernard Audley, there are likewise moments when I feel so horrible a sensation in my brain that it appears as if I were going mad, and in these intervals do I hate you with the most rancorous hatred, loathe you with the intensest loathing. If, then, by word or deed on your part, you only give the slightest impulse to these fevered thoughts of mine, if you only goad me one hair's breadth beyond the point of wretchedness and misery up to which my soul has been already tortured, I shall hate you without mitigation, loathe you without an interval of softness. Then, in that case, if you drive me mad altogether, I shall do you a mischief, I shall wreak upon you that vengeance which any other woman having endured such wrongs as mine would have mercilessly and pitilessly wreaked long years ago."

There was a power in the lady's words and a wild glaring in her eyes which struck Bernard Audley with dismay. Transfixed to the spot and dumb with consternation, he neither moved nor spoke during the lengthy speech which his victim addressed to him; and when she concluded he still continued gazing upon her in a sort of stupor and bewilderment of terror, not knowing how to act or what to say.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" said Lilian, speaking with less excitement but perhaps with more real bitterness in her words as she thus resumed her address. "Bernard Audley, I know you well, and reading your wicked heart so accurately as I do, it is a wonder that I am even able to love you at all, and to think of you with an affectionate interest which is at times as deep as it was when first you won my attachment. Think you that I comprehend not the motive that has hitherto induced you to allow me the pittance which I receive yearly at your hands? It is not bestowed upon me through love, but because you stand in terror of me. You call me your evil genius, and why? Is it because I have more than once saved you from perpetrating crimes that would perhaps have sent you to the scaffold? Is it because I have saved you from becoming the ravisher of innocence? We were speaking ere now of Louisa Stanley. What, think you, would have been your fate had I not interposed in time to prevent the crowning catastrophe in the cathedral crypt? And have you forgotten how I wrote an earnest and prayerful letter to the young maiden, beseeching her to keep the outrage secret and spare you an exposure which would have driven you from the Church, stripped your gown from your back, and despoiled you of the means of existence? Ah! so far from being your evil genius, I have been your good genius. And now, because I again step forward to warn you against giving unbridled license to this frenzied passion which you cherish for Louisa, you upbraid me, you taunt me with my dependence upon you; and in your very words is there a covert threat that you will withdraw my pittance if I continue to interfere with your pleasures. Unhappy man, does no warning voice whisper in your soul that those pleasures, if such they be, may conduct you to ruin and disgrace?"

"Lilian," said Bernard Audley, who during this second speech had found leisure to regain his composure, "I do not wish to anger you, nor am I desirous that disagreeable words should pass between us. But since we thus stand confronted once more, and you have spoken your mind so plainly, since, also, you have chosen to refer in such pointed terms not only to the past, but likewise to our relative positions, let me once for all beg and entreat that you will abstain from any further interference in my pursuits. I have long, long ceased to meddle with yours."

"Yes, because you are heartless and indifferent," exclaimed Lilian, bitterly, "whereas I, throughout a long series of twenty years, have still loved on."

"Then if all these watchings and pryings and peerings result from love," exclaimed Bernard Audley, with mingled passion and scorn, "for Heaven's sake give up loving altogether."

"Ah! do not say that!" cried Lilian, a visible shudder sweeping over her frame, as if she felt the influence of a power which she had ever struggled to ward off. "Do not say that, or it may be I shall follow your advice. Snap but one chord, the last which vibrates in my heart, and this love of mine will dissolve suddenly — no, not dissolve, it will turn into the bitterest hatred."

"I care not," ejaculated the minor canon, his rage now becoming ungovernable. "I detest the sickly sentimentalism which you prate about. Love, indeed! there can be none between us. Circumstances destroyed it long, long ago. It is a morbid feeling of jealousy and disappointment which impels you thus to hang upon my footsteps and interfere in my pursuits. I am sick of it, I am wearied of it, and this day, after all you have said, I am more than ever resolved to rid myself of your impertinent supervision."

"Bernard, this to me?" said Lilian, in a voice of mingled astonishment and reproach, as if she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes, this to you," retorted the minor canon, almost maddened with the rage that had flamed up in his soul. "You yourself have provoked the present crisis. It was not I who sought it. You say that I dwell in fear of you? Well, your words prove the morbid hankering which you have to rule me by terrorism. Now, then, let this bond be broken at once. Do your worst, I defy you. Whatever evil you can say of me, must your own name be mixed up in. And now beware how you continue to molest me. By Heavens! I will do you a mischief the next time you cross my path. As for your income, that shall be paid regularly as heretofore — "

"Enough!" suddenly ejaculated Lilian, her pale countenance having become ghastly, her lips white and quivering, her whole frame convulsed with the agonizing feelings that raged in her bosom. "Enough! you have said your worst,

and you have even dared to threaten your worst. Ah, you will do me a mischief? Then perish all love, and welcome the phase of hatred. Yes, hatred immitigable, unrelieved by a single gleam of tenderness, a hatred that shall arise upon the ruins of withered affections and the best feelings of the heart. As for the pittance you promise to vouchsafe unto me henceforth as heretofore, I scorn it, I repudiate it, I reject it with contempt and abhorrence. Sooner would I drag myself, a miserable mendicant, through the streets and plunge deep down into penury's most hideous slough, than receive another morsel of bread at your hands. Ah, the crisis is indeed come! Farewell, Bernard Audley. We shall meet again, but when next I stand before you, it will not be with the remnants of a long devoted love in my heart, but with all my wrongs raising the cry of vengeance in my soul."

Thus speaking, Lilian Halkin darted away from the minor canon's presence, and disappeared behind the dense foliage of the evergreens. For a few moments did Bernard Audley remain transfixed to the spot, gazing in the direction where she had thus disappeared, and more than half-inclined to call her back, for he felt, indeed, he feared, that he had gone too far, and that he had unnecessarily given provocation to a spirit the wild, strange nature of which he full well knew from past experience. But his pride would not permit him to raise his voice and speak the word of conciliation that might perhaps have recalled her, and at length moving away from the spot where the above scene had taken place, he muttered to himself, " Well, after all, it is perhaps for the best. She may cool down, she may think better of her menaces, and besides, in her foolish fondness she could not altogether find it in her heart to do me harm. Let me banish her from my thoughts, and think only of the adorable Louisa Stanley, whom I shall possess to-night."

CHAPTER XV

THE MAIDEN'S CHAMBER

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Bernard Audley issued forth from his house in the immediate neighbourhood of the cathedral, and, taking a circuitous route, bent his way toward the cottage which he had marked to be the scene of an infamous crime and an immense triumph.

At short intervals he stopped and looked searchingly around to make sure that he was not watched or dogged by Lilian Halkin, and as the night was clear and beautiful, he could see to a considerable distance. Feeling certain that he was not observed nor followed, he pursued his way with increasing hope and confidence, his passions inflamed to an ungovernable extent by the wine which he drank after dinner. He was therefore not merely resolved to gratify these passions if opportunity should serve as he expected, but he had made up his mind, with a sort of desperation, to dare everything, almost to sacrifice everything, sooner than be baffled or disappointed.

In this mood was it that the minor canon arrived, at about half-past nine, in the close vicinage of the cottage, and concealing himself in the shade of the hedge that surrounded the garden, he watched for the anxiously expected opportunity. He had now an entire half-hour for sober and deliberate reflection — if he were capable of it; but he was not. His passions were goaded to a degree bordering upon madness; indeed, it was a madness that now inspired him. If occasionally, for an instant, the whispering of fear should arise in his soul and suggest the possibility of terrific consequences, he at once stifled the salutary warning, crushing it, as it were, beneath the iron heel of his indomitable resolve. Thus the half-hour passed without accomplishing any change

in the purpose of this bold, bad man, and as he heard ten o'clock proclaimed from the towers of the numerous churches in Canterbury, he muttered to himself, with a deep feeling of exultation, "The moment approaches."

Scarcely had the iron tongues of time ceased their loud, metallic sounds when the front door of the cottage was heard to open, and sweet, silvery voices were the next instant wafted to the minor canon's ear. Louisa and Mary were bidding each other an affectionate "Good night." Then Mrs. Owen spoke, saying some kind things to Louisa, and lastly, Louisa's voice was again heard, bidding the servant-maid return as speedily as possible after escorting the two ladies to the Fountain Hotel. Then the little party came forth, accompanied by Louisa as far as the garden gate; and in a few moments Bernard Audley beheld Mrs. Owen, Mary, and the servant-maid (whose Christian name, by the bye, was also Mary) issue from that gate and proceed in the direction which they had to pursue. Louisa Stanley walked slowly back into the cottage, her very pace indicating the pensiveness naturally experienced from the loss of a loved friend who had been her companion for the greater part of a year.

The sound of the front door closing reached the minor canon's ear, and a strange glow thrilled through his entire frame as he now saw that the opportunity for which he had so anxiously awaited was at length within his reach. Still he remained for nearly five minutes in his place of concealment, but it was only to watch the movements of Louisa inside the cottage, and of which he could judge by the light burning within. On the upper story there was one window where a light had been shining all the time the minor canon was stationed at his post, and this, he conjectured, must be the chamber tenanted by the aunt. A light had also been burning in the parlour on the ground floor, but soon after Louisa had reëntered the cottage, as above described, this light disappeared, and in another minute was seen glimmering through the curtains of a window adjoining that of the chamber which Bernard Audley calculated to be the aunt's.

"That, then, is the maiden's own room," he said to himself, as through the hedge he surveyed the window where the light, carried up from the parlour, had just glimmered forth. "Now to enter the cottage!"

Hastening away from his hiding-place, Bernard Audley paused for a few moments at the fence skirting the road, in order to assure himself that his evil genius — as he considered Lilian Halkin to be — was not nigh at hand, and perceiving no one, he without further hesitation passed into the garden. At first his intention was to knock at the front door, and as he knew that only one servant was kept, and this servant was now absent, it would be absolutely necessary for Louisa Stanley herself to answer the summons, when he might rush in and take possession of the citadel. But thinking that if it were possible to gain admittance stealthily, creep up to Louisa's chamber, and vanquish her at the moment of stupor and amazement into which his presence would probably throw her, this plan would be much the better one, he hastily made the circuit of the cottage to reconnoitre. There was a back door opening from the kitchen, and this the minor canon at once tried. It yielded to his touch, and with a renewed, or, rather, enhancing glow of exultation, he passed into the cottage. As the dwelling was but small, he experienced no trouble in groping his way from the kitchen to the foot of the staircase, and there he paused for a minute to listen.

He heard light feet moving overhead. These could be only the steps of Louisa Stanley, and he said to himself, "She is going into her aunt's room, perhaps with the intention of remaining there until the servant returns. But no; it was merely to see that her relative was duly cared for. And now she goes back into her own chamber."

He then took off his shoes and crept stealthily as a cat up the carpeted stairs. Fortunately for his design, they creaked not, and noiselessly as any intrusive thief did he ascend to the little landing above. Through a small window shone a sufficiency of light to show him two doors facing each other, and from the observations he had made ere entering the cottage he was at no loss to discover which was the one leading into Louisa's room. For a single instant, and only for an instant, he trembled and wished himself away; but the very next moment the thought that on the other side of that door was the beauteous creature whom he had so long and so ardently coveted made all his passions fire up again with irresistible force. His fingers sought the handle of the door, he turned it. Suddenly he rushed in, and a wild

"APPEARED UPON THE THRESHOLD"
Photogravure from original by Bird.

Hastening away from his lodging-place, Bernard Audley paused for a few moments at the [illegible] the road, in order to assure himself that he [illegible] as he considered [illegible] and perceiving [illegible] the garden. [illegible] and as he knew that only one servant was kept, and that servant was very aged, it would be absolutely necessary for Louisa Stanley herself to answer the summons, when he might rush in and take possession of the citadel. But thinking that if it were possible to gain admittance stealthily, creep up to Louisa's chamber, and overpower her at the moment of stupor and astonishment [illegible] would probably throw her, this [illegible] would be much the better one, he hastily [illegible] of the cottage to reconnoitre. There was a back door opening from the kitchen, and this the [illegible] at once tried. It yielded to his touch, and with a [illegible], or, rather, enhancing glow of exultation, he passed into the cottage. As the dwelling was but small, he experienced no trouble in groping his way from the kitchen to the foot of the staircase, and there he paused for a minute to listen.

He heard light feet moving overhead. These could be only the steps of Louisa Stanley, and he said to himself, "She is going into her aunt's room, perhaps with the intention of remaining there until the servant returns. But no: it was merely to see that her relative was duly [illegible]. And now she goes back into her own [illegible]."

He then took off his shoes and [illegible] as a cat up the [illegible] stairs. [illegible] on the landing, they crouched [illegible] and [illegible] did he ascend to the [illegible]. Through a small window shone a [illegible] of the two doors facing each other, and [illegible] had made ere entering the cottage he [illegible] which was the one leading into Louisa's room. For a single moment, and only for an instant, [illegible] without himself fully, but the very next [illegible] that on the other side of that door [illegible] had so long and so [illegible] fire up again with [illegible] handle of the door, he [illegible] and a wild

"APPEARED UPON THE THRESHOLD."
Photogravure from original by Bird.

shriek thrilled from Louisa's lips as she at once recognized the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley.

The young maiden had not begun to prepare for rest when this infamous intrusion took place. She was therefore completely dressed, no article of apparel being laid aside.

The minor canon sprang upon her rather with the violence of a tiger than in the manner of a human being, and, seizing her around the waist, he said, in a hoarse, thick voice, "You are mine, Louisa, you are mine. Nothing can save you."

But again from the young damsel's lips went forth a piercing, rending shriek, a shriek which must have penetrated through wall and floor and ceiling, and would have been heard far beyond the cottage were any one passing at the time.

She struggled desperately to release herself from the iron grasp which Bernard Audley had fixed upon her, and at the very instant that he was about to approach his lips to hers, she seized him by the hair and wrenched back his head with an almost superhuman force. And still her tongue sent forth the wildest cries for help.

"By Heaven! you shall be mine," said the minor canon, in the same hoarse, thick voice of concentrated passion as before, and he placed one of his hands upon Louisa's mouth, in the hope of stifling her cries.

At this instant a door was heard to open violently, and the next moment a form, looking like a ghost from the grave, appeared upon the threshold of Louisa's chamber. The minor canon, stricken with sudden dismay, loosened his hold upon the young damsel, and she, at once breaking from him, rushed wildly toward that spectre-like form, exclaiming, "My aunt! my aunt!"

Miss Stanley, for she indeed it was, habited in her night-clothes, just as she had sprung up from the couch which for three long years she had kept in paralysis and unconsciousness, threw her arms about the neck of her niece, murmuring, "Louisa, dearest Louisa!" Then, as if utterly overpowered by the tremendous effort, she sank down heavily upon the floor.

"Heaven itself wars against me!" exclaimed Bernard Audley; and though through this relapse of the aunt into profound unconsciousness again Louisa was as much as ever

in his power, yet not for worlds dared he lay a finger upon her more.

The feeling that now inspired him was that of an awful superstition. The flame of his maddening passions had been extinguished in a moment, and flying from the room, precipitating himself down the stairs, he rushed from the house as if pursued by some hideous phantom from the grave or some avenging spirit from the world which lies beyond it.

Pause we here for a few moments to explain the phenomenon which had just occurred. As the reader is well aware, it was three years since Miss Stanley (as we had better continue to call her, at least for the present, rather than by her real name of Halkin) was stricken with the paralysis that had deprived her of speech and reason. For those three years had she lived on, utterly unconscious of what was passing around her, for although she retained the faculties of sight and hearing, yet all images that met her eyes were reflected in a brain which comprehended them not, and the same was it with all sounds that reached her ears. But the psychological philosopher and the physiological inquirer need only be appealed to in order to testify unto the fact that even in such a prostrate condition of mind and body as that in which Miss Stanley lay stretched and stricken down for three long years it needs but some incident of a very extraordinary character to dissolve the bonds of paralysis and loosen the mental and physical energies from the shackles placed upon them. So was it in this case. Louisa's piercing shrieks had thrilled through her aunt's brain. The spell was dissolved in a moment, she snapped, as it were, the chains which held her fast, and mechanically, without having her ideas sufficiently collected even to ask herself what it could all mean, she hastened to her niece's chamber. She came in time to save that excellent girl's virtue from the power of the ravisher, in time, too, to save her lips from the pollution of his caresses, and, as we have already seen, the infamous man, stricken with an awful consternation and feeling at the moment that Heaven itself warred against his diabolical purpose, fled precipitately in terror and dismay.

What words can express all the varied emotions which Louisa experienced in those few brief instants which elapsed

while the phase of her deliverance was passing? The sudden appearance of her aunt filled her with ineffable joy, not only in consequence of her own rescue, which it at once accomplished, but likewise because of the wondrous cure which she thus beheld so suddenly effected. But while all terror on account of Bernard Audley was in a moment dissipated, a new source of alarm and anguish at once presented itself, for this dearly beloved aunt, who had risen from her lethargy of three years to save her, had sunk down into unconsciousness once more.

Oh, with what earnest, heartfelt hope, but with what sore misgivings and direful apprehensions also, did Louisa raise her relative from the carpet and bear her to the couch! Then with what anxious suspense did she watch the effect of the restoratives that she hastened to administer, and what joy indescribable expanded in her heart as she beheld the invalid slowly open her eyes, but open them in consciousness!

Sinking down upon her knees by the side of the bed, Louisa murmured, with deepest fervour, " O God, I thank thee for this! "

" Louisa, sweetest, dearest Louisa," said her aunt, in a low voice, and speaking with difficulty, " what has happened? Have I not been dreaming horribly? Methought I heard piercing shrieks."

" Oh, my beloved aunt! Heaven be thanked that you are thus restored to me! " cried Louisa, starting from her knees and embracing her relative with an enthusiasm which was almost wild.

" Restored to you, my dear girl. What mean you? " asked Miss Stanley, gazing earnestly upon the lovely countenance of her niece. " Ah! " she continued, pressing her hand to her forehead as if to collect the thoughts that were in confusion, " I have a feeling here as if something had happened. Yes, there seems to be a gap. I do not remember going to bed last night. Let me think. You and Clara and I were seated together after dinner, we were conversing, and then it seems as if everything had suddenly become a blank. How was it? I do not recollect that we had tea, or that you bade me good night, or that I went up to bed as usual — But heavens, dearest Louisa, you are weeping, weeping bitterly, too. Come, dear child, tell me, what mean these tears? "

Louisa could not speak. She tried to say something, but her voice was choked in sobs. It was indeed a scene profoundly touching for the poor girl. Three years had elapsed since the day of which her aunt had been speaking, that day when she was suddenly stricken down with paralysis, and a blank had indeed from that moment been the interval for her until the present one.

"You have been ill, very, very ill," at length sobbed forth the weeping girl.

"Ill! very ill!" repeated Miss Stanley. Then, after pausing for nearly a minute, as if to ascertain precisely what all her feelings and sensations were, she said, "Yes, I have now a kind of intuitive knowledge that I have been ill, very ill, as you say, my dearest Louisa. Perhaps, then, I have been ill for some days, or it may be for some weeks?"

"Yes, dear aunt," returned Louisa, now wiping her eyes, for that flood of tears had relieved her surcharged heart, "a great many, many weeks, and I wept because it cut me to the very quick to think that a portion of your life should have thus passed away as an utter blank to you, and that now, when you awake to consciousness once more, you should speak of the day on which you were taken ill as if it were but yesterday."

"Louisa, love, you alarm me," said the aunt, looking intently up into her niece's countenance. "Have I, then, been ill so long, so very long?"

"Dear aunt, there is nothing now to alarm you. See, I weep no more. I am happy, yes, Heaven knows I am happy now, and sincerely do I thank God Almighty for this great goodness on his part."

"And I also feel in my soul a deep gratitude to that Providence which has restored me to you," said Miss Stanley, in a very serious tone, "for I know full well how imperiously necessary my life is to the welfare of yourself and dear Clara. But where is Clara? Go and fetch her to me. I long to embrace her."

"Dear aunt, do not excite yourself too much now," said Louisa, not offering to move from the couch by the side of which she stood half-bending over her invalid relative, "for of course I have a great many things to tell you."

"But nothing wrong? Has any evil happened?" asked Miss Stanley, with feverish haste.

"No, nothing, nothing wrong, everything happy and prosperous, so far as we are concerned," and a blush mantled on Louisa's countenance as she felt that her allusion partly referred to her own engagement with Jocelyn Loftus.

"But where is Clara? Why do you not go and fetch her?" asked Miss Stanley, whose sight was yet too feeble to enable her to notice that crimson glow upon her young niece's countenance.

"Clara, my dear aunt, is not at home at this moment. She is staying with some friends, some very kind friends, with whom she has been a year and upwards."

"Louisa!" ejaculated Miss Stanley, actually shivering with affright. "Do you mean me to understand that I have been so long ill, so long insensible?"

"Yes, dear aunt," replied Louisa, softly, "more than that. But pray don't excite yourself; you must not, really you must not."

"Tell me at once, then, dear girl, how long I have been ill, if you would save me from the most torturing suspense."

"I will, dear aunt, I will tell you everything," said Louisa, perceiving how necessary it was to give the required explanations guardedly and gradually. "It is more than a year, but now, thank Heaven, you are recovered at last. It is more than two years, — dear aunt, do not, do not excite yourself, — 'tis three years since you were first taken ill."

"Three years!" repeated Miss Stanley, in a low, hollow voice, as if absolutely dismayed and struck with consternation by the announcement. Then, after a brief pause, during which an almost awful seriousness settled upon her features, she said, "Now tell me, Louisa, tell me truly, — for I hope that on my recovery I find the same good girls whom I left, as it were, when sinking into this dreadful lethargy of three long years, — tell me, I ask, how you have lived in the interval?"

"Dear aunt, we learned from the bank that you had obtained your money from Mr. Beckford in London, and the banker wrote to him. He replied that he would pay us as regularly as he was wont to pay you."

"Ah! thank God!" exclaimed Miss Stanley, evidently experiencing an indescribable relief. "Then you have not been without resources? But now let me look at you, Louisa. Draw back the curtain — more still; stand with your face

so that the light may fall upon it. There, that is as I could wish. And now I feel my sight improving — I can see you as plainly as I was wont. What a charming girl you have grown! Let me reflect. You are twenty. Yes, you are a sweet girl, and God in his mercy be thanked, there is the same unmistakable innocence in your looks, the same purity and chastity and candour upon your brow. Come and embrace me, sweet girl, come to my arms, for again I thank God that I awake to find you all that I could wish."

Louisa kissed her aunt with enthusiastic devotion, and for some time they spoke not, but gazed upon each other in deep and fervid thankfulness for what might be termed a blessed restoration.

"But now," said the aunt, at length breaking silence once more, "tell me what meant that dreadful screaming. For I recollect what it was that must have startled me from my stupendous lethargy. And, ah! was there not some man here?"

"A villain who found his way to my chamber," replied Louisa.

"But who was he?" asked Miss Stanley.

"You would scarcely believe it, aunt," replied the young maiden, "but it is nevertheless true. That man is the Reverend Bernard Audley, one of the minor canons."

"Heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Miss Stanley, her countenance expressing some other feeling besides indignation on her niece's account. "Bernard Audley! and he in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, dear aunt, he is a minor canon of the cathedral," responded Louisa, "and was appointed about eighteen months ago. But do you know him? Why do you gaze upon me in this manner? Do you think I am deceiving you? Heavens! I am incapable — "

"Hush, dear Louisa! not for a moment do I doubt your word. But I am astonished, for that name is indeed full well, too well known to me. Bernard Audley is a villain of the blackest dye."

"And I, dear aunt, have been more than once the object of his persecutions," Louisa observed. "On the first occasion, — it was in the Dane John, he accosted me and was very rude, but I was rescued from his impertinent molestation by a young gentleman, a very excellent young

gentleman. Clara has made all inquiries concerning him, and has ascertained that he is of the highest character — "

"Ah! I understand," said Miss Stanley, whose sight was now strong enough to enable her to observe the telltale blush upon Louisa's cheeks. "You love him? Well, my dear girl, if he be indeed all that you represent, and you have ascertained that he is so, there is no harm in a virtuous attachment."

"Ah! my dearest aunt, when you come to know Jocelyn Loftus, you will welcome him most kindly," said Louisa, again embracing Miss Stanley. "He will be here in a few days. I had a letter from him this morning, dated from Geneva. It is a very, very sad business which has detained him there; but it was to be all over yesterday, and then he was to leave at once for England. His name is not Jocelyn Loftus — "

"Heavens, what do you tell me?" asked Miss Stanley, all her confidence damped, and naturally so, by this announcement, artlessly and ingenuously though it was made.

"There is nothing to fear, aunt," continued the young damsel. "Through no unworthy motives has Jocelyn Loftus taken this name; and he would have given me all requisite explanations when he was last in England, but he said he would rather postpone them till the eve of our marriage, when he would reveal everything. They are family circumstances which have made him adopt a feigned name; and I, having the fullest confidence and placing the utmost reliance in him, cheerfully consented to wait his own good will and pleasure for those explanations. To-morrow, dear aunt, I will show you all his letters, and then you shall judge for yourself what his character and disposition really are."

"And how long have you known him?" asked Miss Stanley, reassured once more by the frankness with which her niece spoke and the confidence in which she referred to her lover's letters.

"A year, very nearly," replied Louisa. Then casting down her eyes bashfully, and with a blush again mantling upon her countenance, she said, "We should have been married some time ago, and then it was his intention to have you conveyed in a carriage, built expressly for the purpose, to our future home, a beautiful mansion which he possesses in Northum-

berland; for, believe me, my dear aunt, that Jocelyn — as we must of course still call him for the present — has ever spoken of you with the kindest interest, and when we have been talking over our future plans, your welfare and comforts have entered largely into the arrangements thus laid down."

"I am delighted, my dear Louisa," observed Miss Stanley, "to hear all that you are telling me. Yes, I see that this young gentleman must be honourable and well-intentioned, and I have now no doubt he will give satisfactory explanations for the adoption of a fictitious name. Perhaps he may even turn out to be some one of a more elevated rank than you suppose."

"Clara has hinted something to this effect in one of her recent letters," said Louisa, "but I never suffer that idea to dwell in my mind. I do not wish him to be more than he appears. At all events, if he were a prince I should not love him more than I do. And now, my dear aunt, I should mention to you that the business which has taken him to the Continent is in itself of a nature to win your esteem, although it has been connected with some dreadful adventures," and Louisa shuddered visibly as she spoke. "But it was not his fault."

"Explain yourself, my dear child," said Miss Stanley. "Do not fear of exciting me too much. I feel strong in body and intellect to a surprising extent, considering all things."

"Jocelyn Loftus," resumed Louisa, "went abroad for the purpose of defeating a dreadful conspiracy which was devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which certain young ladies named Owen — "

"Ah! Owen?" repeated Miss Stanley. "Tell me their Christian names?" she inquired, eagerly.

"Agatha, Emma — "

"Enough, it is they!" ejaculated the aunt.

"What! you know them? You have heard of them?" cried Louisa. "This is most strange. You knew Mr. Audley's name; you now know these. But perhaps you will be astonished when I tell you that Mary Owen, the youngest of the four sisters, — and oh, so different from the rest, — has been an inmate of this cottage for the last ten or eleven months."

" Then do you know who she is? " asked Miss Stanley, in astonishment.

" Yes, the daughter of Mrs. Owen who has hitherto dwelt at Richmond, near London, but who is now in Canterbury, and has been here the greatest portion of this day."

" Louisa, you astound me! Did she tell you anything particular? "

" No, nothing," was the response. " She is very unhappy, and has taken Mary away with her. One of her daughters, Emma, was murdered at Geneva. Agatha and Julia have gone mad."

" Oh, these are indeed frightful things," exclaimed Miss Stanley, with a cold shudder, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. Then, after a long pause, she said, " Has Mrs. Owen left Canterbury? Will she come to see you again? "

" Yes, she will not quit England for two or three days. But hark! I hear footsteps on the stairs," exclaimed Louisa, momentarily frightened by the sound, for she feared lest it should be the minor canon returning; but all in a moment recollecting that the servant had gone out, she said, " It is Mary " (alluding to the domestic) " come back. She has been to escort Mrs. Owen and her daughter to the hotel."

It will be impossible to describe the mingled astonishment and joy with which the faithful servant received the intelligence that Miss Stanley had in so marvellous a manner shaken off the spell of paralysis and regained possession alike of her physical powers and her mental energies. But when she heard the adventure which had led to this sudden and almost miraculous recovery, the indignation she experienced that such an outrage should have been offered to Louisa was succeeded by a feeling of enthusiastic joy, as she exclaimed, " Well, miss, after all, we have to a certain extent to thank that wicked clergyman for his intrusion, since you have escaped unharmed, and your aunt has been revived by the occurrence."

Then the faithful servant was admitted into the chamber, and with tears did she offer her congratulations to Miss Stanley for what had taken place.

" My dear Louisa," said the aunt, " you must now retire to rest. Mary will remain with me for the night. Nay, but I insist upon it. You can arise early in the morning and come to me again, for we have still many things to talk about,

and though my curiosity is keenly excited to question you on several points, so that from your lips I may learn all that has happened, even to the minutest details, during this long blank in my existence, yet must I restrain that curiosity until the morrow. I know that I ought not to yield to exciting influences. Indeed, I experience some fatigue already. Therefore, leave me, dearest Louisa. I think that I shall soon go to sleep."

The young maiden accordingly embraced her aunt, and then retired to rest in another chamber.

CHAPTER XVI

APPREHENSIONS AND SUSPICIONS

The opening flowers were giving forth their perfume to the freshness of the morning air, and the churches in the old cathedral city were proclaiming the hour of six, when Louisa Stanley, having risen and performed the avocations of the toilet, noiselessly entered the chamber where her aunt now lay. She met the maid servant who was coming out at the moment, and she saw by that faithful domestic's countenance that there was everything still to hope in respect to the invalid, and that no relapse had taken place. The aunt had passed a good night, and was now awake. She accordingly welcomed her niece with a most affectionate interest, and bidding her sit down by the bedside, said, " We must now, dear Louisa, resume the thread of our discourse where it was broken off last night. We had been talking about Mrs. Owen and her daughters, you remember, when Mary " (alluding to the servant-maid) " came back. I did not choose, after you left the room, to question her relative to a single thing. I not only feared the consequences of a prolonged excitement, but was anxious to receive all explanations from your lips. Let us now speak of Clara."

" Dear aunt," said Louisa, producing a packet of letters, " I have brought you all the correspondence I have received either from my sister or from Jocelyn Loftus. Here it is, entirely at your disposal."

" You are a good girl, Louisa," said Miss Stanley, " and it is to me a source of indescribable comfort and satisfaction to find you thus frank, open-hearted, and ingenuous as ever."

" Without vanity, and without egotism, my dear aunt," said Louisa, in a soft tone, and with genuine sincerity in her looks, " I can conscientiously declare that I have never,

during your long illness, harboured a thought, done a deed, or taken a single step which I should be ashamed for you to know. And now at once, before we speak of aught else, let me confess that I quitted you on one occasion, but not without the deep conviction and assurance that in Mary Owen I left an excellent substitute and kind guardian."

"But whither did you go, my dear Louisa?" asked Miss Stanley, surprised, though neither alarmed nor angered, at the confession which her niece was now making.

"I went to Paris," replied the maiden. "Indeed, I was inveigled thither in a most ungenerous and unhandsome manner by a nobleman named the Marquis of Leveson; and for a time I was rendered very wretched indeed by an attempt which he made to induce me to believe that Jocelyn Loftus was not only unfaithful to me, but also a very bad man. Ah, my dear aunt, I was very, very unhappy then. The marquis brought me back to England, and I was induced to accompany him to London. There he threw off the mask and endeavoured to treat me vilely, aided also by his niece, a lady so very beautiful and seeming so good that I was at first completely prepossessed in her favour. Oh, I shudder when I think how nearly I was destroyed and undone by the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Ernestina Dysart. But Heaven sent a kind friend to my deliverance, and this was done through Clara's instrumentality. Then I saw Clara, and came straight home again to the cottage. Clara convinced me that my suspicions relative to Jocelyn Loftus had been most unfounded. In due course he himself returned from Paris, where he had been kept in prison through the most wicked devices; and he then satisfied me, even if I were not previously convinced, how cruelly he had been wronged by those suspicions. A letter came from the Princess Sophia, requesting him to go to London. He did so, and when he returned he was compelled to set off again for the Continent. This was six or seven months ago, and there he has been ever since. But, as I told you last night, he will be home in a day or two, having fully succeeded in unmasking the conspiracy which had been devised against the Princess of Wales. And now, my dear aunt, I have given you a rapid but faithful outline of all that concerns myself."

"You have indeed passed through many and serious

adventures, my dear girl," said Miss Stanley, " but since you have escaped in security and safety, no cause for regret or sorrow remains behind. I long to see this Jocelyn Loftus, the correspondent as well as the champion of princesses. He must be a noble character. But now tell me everything that concerns Clara. You said last night that she was staying with some kind friends, and that she had been with them a year."

" Did I not name the Beckfords? " asked Louisa, ingenuously.

" The Beckfords! " ejaculated Miss Stanley, with a sort of subdued scream and a convulsive start. " What mean you? There are no such people in existence! " she cried, in the excitement of her feelings, and without pausing to weigh the import of her words.

Louisa gazed upon her in speechless astonishment.

" Ah! since I have thus suffered that revelation to escape my lips," cried Miss Stanley, still fearfully excited, " I will not attempt to recall it."

" But, my dear aunt," said Louisa, now recovering the power of speech, " every letter which I have received from Clara speaks of Mr. and Mrs. Beckford. She is living with them, they have adopted her; it is they who have given her the means of supplying me with money, and indeed it was at their house that I saw Clara when in London."

" What dreadful delusion is all this? What fearful mystery is involved herein," exclaimed the aunt, actually writhing in her couch with the tortures of misgiving and suspense. " The Beckfords' house, you say. But where was it? In what square or street? "

" Oh," returned Louisa, " they have removed some time ago from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street, and it was at this latter place that I saw Clara."

" But did you see any one passing by the name of Beckford? " inquired the aunt, still with the most fevered impatience.

" No, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford were not in town at the moment. But here are Clara's letters, confirming all I tell you," added Louisa, both pained and frightened at the strange manner of mingled incredulity, astonishment, and alarm in which her aunt gazed up at her.

" Let me see them," cried Mrs. Stanley. " Leave all this

correspondence to me. Draw back the window-curtain a little. There, that will do. And now go down, my dear child, and see about the breakfast. Come up to me again presently. But do not be alarmed, dear Louisa, at anything I may have said. I know that you are artless, ingenuous, and good. There is innocence in all your looks."

"Oh, tell me, my dear aunt," exclaimed the young maiden, the tears gushing forth upon her long lashes, "tell me whether you apprehend any harm relative to Clara; for I know not how it is, but your words have excited dreadful misgivings in my mind."

"My dear girl, I dare not conceal from you the fact that there is some mystery which must be cleared up," said her aunt, in a solemn voice. "I am bewildered, I cannot understand it."

"But you said there were no such persons as Mr. and Mrs. Beckford?" exclaimed Louisa, hurriedly.

"There was one who, for certain reasons, bore that name, but it was not his real one." Then after a few moments' pause Miss Stanley asked, "Has Clara ever mentioned to you in her letters a certain Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"Sir Archibald Malvern?" echoed the young maiden. "No, Clara has never spoken of him, but I read in the newspaper, a day or two ago, — for I sometimes borrow a newspaper from the circulating library, especially since those dreadful things occurred at Geneva — "

"But what were you going to tell me?" interrupted the aunt, impatiently. "You read in the newspaper — "

"That a certain Sir Archibald Malvern, whose mysterious disappearance had for more than a year past caused the greatest affliction to his son and to his numerous friends, had been found — "

"Alive?" asked Miss Stanley, with almost a wild quickness.

"No, his remains were discovered in some suburban villa, near London," responded Louisa, "and they were interred accordingly. The paragraph was very brief, and I have given you the substance of it."

"What you now tell me," observed the aunt, "increases the mystery relative to Clara. Ah! I see you are surprised at this intimation that the death of Sir Archibald Malvern, or even the bare mention of his name, can have aught to do with the matters of which we are speaking, but the

ramifications of all these mysteries, for they are many and they are deep," added Miss Stanley, emphatically, " are so strangely interwoven — "

" Oh, you terrify me, my dear aunt," said Louisa. " Can any harm have happened to Clara? " Then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she went on to say, " I do indeed know that London is a very dangerous place and that amongst all classes, but especially the highest, there are great numbers of bad and profligate people. That Lady Ernestina Dysart, the Marquis of Leveson's niece, of whom I spoke just now, was led to tell me — I know not in what strange mood at the time — many strange things about the profligacy of the fashionable world; and she especially quoted as an instance a certain celebrated beauty named Venetia Trelawney, who, by her arts and wiles, had raised herself to the peerage. Having married a gentleman named Sackville, she and her husband — Lord and Lady Sackville — dwell at Carlton House, and she is the great favourite of the prince regent."

" But what, my dear Louisa," interrupted Miss Stanley, " has all this to do with the topics of our discourse? "

" Nothing, except that all that I heard concerning this Venetia Trelawney, or, rather, Lady Sackville," rejoined Louisa, " has for some reason or another, I cannot define what, made a considerable impression on my mind, and has often intruded itself upon my thoughts. Perhaps it was because the wicked example of this Lady Sackville made me fear for my beloved sister Clara, placed as she is in a metropolis abounding with such temptations and she herself being of such a rare beauty. For you know not, dear aunt, how wonderfully Clara has improved. When I saw her, seven or eight months ago, in London, although only after a separation of a like interval, I was struck by that improvement. Ah! I felt so proud of her, for there is really something grand and imposing in Clara's looks. She has become quite the polished lady — and, oh," exclaimed the artless young maiden, her thoughts in their excitement thus rapidly ranging from one topic to another, " what pleasure shall I have in writing to her to-day, to inform her of your recovery and beseech her to return home at once to see you. And she too will be so overjoyed, for you will perceive by her letters what affectionate mention she always makes of you."

"Leave me, then, dear child," said Miss Stanley, "to the perusal of the letters; and when you come up again, in an hour or so, we shall perhaps have some further conversation upon these serious topics."

Louisa accordingly quitted the chamber, and descended to the parlour, where the table was already spread for breakfast. It was now past eight o'clock, and the young maiden placed upon a tray the requisite refreshments for her aunt, and sent them up by the servant. She herself left the morning meal untasted; her heart was filled with a variety of conflicting emotions. She had every reason for satisfaction in her aunt's recovery and in the prospect of her lover's speedy return to England; but, on the other hand, she experienced certain misgivings and uneasy suspicions in consequence of what Miss Stanley had said relative to Clara and the Beckfords. Perhaps the reader will ask what course she intended to take with regard to the Reverend Bernard Audley, and whether she purposed to pass over his vile conduct in silence. This subject likewise entered into the maiden's thoughts, but as Jocelyn Loftus would so soon return to England, she resolved to let the matter stand over until she saw him.

Issuing forth from the parlour, where the untasted meal remained upon the table, she rambled in the garden. At nine o'clock she sent the servant up to inquire whether her aunt was yet prepared to receive her, and the reply brought back was that Miss Stanley had not been able as yet to go entirely through the correspondence. Louisa accordingly remained walking in the garden, and thus nearly another hour passed away. The postman now made his appearance with a letter, and Louisa, on receiving it, at once recognized the writing of her sister Clara. Tearing it open, she read the following lines:

"London, Tuesday Evening,
"July 19, 1815.

"I take up my pen, dearest Louisa, to write you a few hurried words, that you may be prepared to see me to-morrow, Wednesday. I shall leave London at about nine o'clock, and shall be in Canterbury by three in the afternoon. Shortly after that hour you may expect to see me. A circumstance has occurred; a secret, indeed, has come to my knowledge, intimately concerning us both. It is, in short, the secret of

our birth, relative to which there are many strange things that we never knew before. I tell you this much in order that you may be prepared for the revelation I have to make. I shall not come alone. Sir Valentine Malvern, from whose lips I myself have learned that solemn secret, will accompany me.

"But this is not all, dear Louisa. I shall avail myself of the same opportunity to make known certain matters connected with myself; and here, likewise in order to prepare you for this intelligence and to guard you against the too sudden effects of a surprise, I must at once inform you that I am married. Yes, I am married; and the alliance is one which in a worldly point of view may be proclaimed with pride. It is not, however, Sir Valentine Malvern who is my husband, nor, indeed, will my husband accompany me upon the present occasion. But I can say no more now, save and except that I hope to find our beloved aunt as well as under circumstances she possibly can be.

"Ten thousand kisses, dearest Louisa, from

"Your affectionate sister,

"CLARA."

Louisa was overjoyed at the receipt of this letter, and the moment she had rapidly scanned its contents, without waiting to reflect upon them, she flew, light as the fawn, up to the chamber where her aunt lay, exclaiming, "Clara is coming home to-day. She will he here between three and four this afternoon. She is married, too, and the alliance is an excellent one."

The aunt, whose countenance wore a look of the utmost seriousness and indeed affliction at the moment when Louisa thus burst into her presence, half-started up in the couch with wonder and excitement as the young damsel gave rapid vent to those ejaculations. Then, taking the letter from Louisa's hand, Miss Stanley hurriedly perused its contents, and sinking upon her pillow, she murmured, "Thank God, whatever may have happened, Clara is married!"

Louisa did not notice that these words were spoken with a feeling of relief produced by the letter, for the young lady was too overjoyed by the prospect of embracing her sister to have eyes or ears for any other subject.

"Are you not glad, aunt, that Clara is coming?" she inquired, "and are you not well pleased that she is married so happily?"

"I am indeed well pleased," answered Miss Stanley, as she flung a look upon the letters, with which the coverlid of the bed was strewn, for the perusal of those letters had filled the worthy woman's mind with the sorest alarm, not merely respecting the welfare, but the integrity, truthfulness, and honour of her elder niece, Clara.

"But what secret is it that she has to reveal?" exclaimed Louisa, "and relative to our birth, too! Surely, dear aunt, you are well acquainted with all that? I never thought there was any mystery at all connected with it. Was not our dear father your brother? Was he not killed in battle during the Flemish campaigns, and did not his loss break our poor mother's heart?"

"Let us not say another word upon this topic now," interrupted the aunt. "Nor, indeed, will we at present renew our conversation upon any topic on which we have previously spoken. I am heartily glad that Clara is coming, for all mysteries, such as they are, and whatever they may be, shall and must now be cleared up. Heaven be thanked that Clara is married!" added Miss Stanley, thus again giving verbal expression to the relief her mind had experienced on her elder niece's account.

CHAPTER XVII

CLARA

It will be recollected that Lilian Halkin had promised Mrs. Owen to call upon her at the Fountain Hotel; and it was accordingly about two o'clock on the day of which we are writing that the former proceeded to that establishment and was introduced into the room where her sister and Mary were seated. Immediately upon making her appearance Lilian raised the dark veil which she was accustomed to wear over her countenance, and walking straight up to Mary, took her by the hand, looked steadfastly at her, and then said, abruptly, but in the soft, mild tone which habitually characterized her voice, "Innocence is written in your features, my dear girl. For Heaven's sake, retain such a goodly imprint for ever."

"Embrace your aunt, Mary," said Mrs. Owen. Then, as the young girl threw herself into Lilian's arms, the mother continued to observe, "Mary knows that you are my sister, knows also that the bedridden invalid on whom she has so often tended is her aunt likewise, and that the charming Louisa who gave her an asylum is her cousin."

"Ah! then you have given your daughter certain explanations?" said Lilian, turning to Mrs. Owen after having affectionately embraced Mary.

"Yes, certain explanations," rejoined Mrs. Owen, with marked emphasis, as much as to imply that those explanations were limited. "Now, dear Mary, you can retire to your own chamber for the present. Your aunt and I have much to talk about, and presently we shall go together to the cottage to see our poor sister. We shall not ask you to accompany us on this occasion, but in the evening it is probable that we will either come back and conduct you

thither, or else get Louisa to send up the servant to fetch you."

"Oh, pray do not disappoint me," exclaimed Mary. "I long to call Louisa by the endearing name of cousin."

"You shall see her again to-day, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen.

Mary then withdrew from the apartment, and the two sisters were left alone together.

"It appears, then," said Lilian, "that you have decided upon making yourself known to Louisa?"

"Yes, I passed all the afternoon and evening in her company after you and I separated in the Dane John, and her conduct was most kind and cordial toward me. Indeed, she is an excellent-hearted girl, and evidently believes that the cruel misfortunes I have experienced in respect to my three eldest daughters are an ample chastisement for all that I have done. And such, indeed, I feel it, for the infliction is great and terrible."

The two sisters then sat down together and conversed for a long time upon many matters. They gave mutual explanations relative to various circumstances which before were only partially known to each other, and which intimately concerned themselves. But as we shall presently have to combine the histories of the four sisters, Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian Halkin, all in one narrative, it is not here necessary to anticipate any portion thereof. Suffice it to say that in sincere penitence for the past did these two sisters mingle their tears together; and their explanations being over, they decided upon at once repairing to the cottage, in order to make known their relationship to Louisa, and also to see their invalid sister, whose restoration to consciousness and comparative health they little suspected.

But in paying this visit they had deemed it better to go alone, there being something solemn and sacred in the proceeding, and they feared lest in any unguarded moment they might let fall from their lips more than they chose the youthful Mary to know. Indeed, when Mrs. Owen had declared that she had given her daughter certain explanations, it was as much as to say that she had revealed nothing of the past beyond the bare fact of the relationships above announced.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin were prepared to issue

forth, when a travelling-carriage and four drove into the courtyard of the Fountain Hotel, and the two ladies paused for an instant at the window of the apartment to observe who should alight. A servant in livery leaped down from the box and opened the door of the carriage. A tall, handsome young gentleman, dressed in deep black, first stepped out, and then assisted a lady to alight. This lady had a veil over her face, but as she descended the steps of the carriage, it blew aside with a sudden gust of wind, and Mrs. Owen, catching a glimpse of the splendid countenance thus revealed, exclaimed, " It is Lady Sackville! "

" What, Lady Sackville, the celebrated court beauty, with whose fame all England has rung? " asked Lilian.

" The same," replied Mrs. Owen. " But see how quickly she replaces her veil, as if she did not choose to be observed by the hotel servants who are thronging about the carriage."

" Do you know her ladyship? " asked Lilian.

" Not to speak to. But I have many times seen her riding in her carriage in London. That is not her husband who is with her. I know Lord Sackville well by sight, and this is not he. Surely it cannot be an elopement? "

" Ah! my dear sister," said Lilian, " let us not suffer our thoughts to be diverted from our own affairs to those of other people. Come, it is three o'clock, let us away to the cottage. Remember, we have promised poor little Mary that she shall see Louisa again this evening."

" Come, then, let us away," said Mrs. Owen.

The two sisters accordingly went forth together. Taking no further notice of the equipage which had just arrived, they passed out from the courtyard of the spacious hotel into the street, and then took the shortest way to the Dane John. This they threaded quickly, and in a very short time reached the cottage.

Louisa, who was anxiously looking from the window of the chamber where her aunt lay to watch for the arrival of her sister, beheld Mrs. Owen, in company with another lady, likewise dressed in black, and she was at once struck with the idea that this other lady was the one who had rescued her a year back from the power of Bernard Audley in the cathedral crypt.

" Who is it? " inquired her aunt, on hearing an ejaculation drop from the young maiden's lip.

"Mrs. Owen, with another lady," replied Louisa. "I will hasten and say what you have told me."

Thereupon she quitted the chamber, and proceeding down-stairs, welcomed Mrs. Owen and her companion into the parlour. Then, before another word was spoken, the delighted girl exclaimed, "My dear aunt has recovered. The paralysis has left her; she has regained the use of her limbs — and, what is better still, the powers of her intellect. She wishes to see you immediately, Mrs. Owen, and has desired me to show you up before any further explanations take place. These are her own words."

The astonishment of Mrs. Owen and Lilian, on hearing such startling intelligence from Louisa's lips, may be conceived more easily than described, and the tears gushed forth from their eyes.

"But how, my dear girl," asked Mrs. Owen, "did this wonderful result come about?"

"First tell me, my dear madam," asked Louisa, "why you have not brought Mary with you? I hope she is not unwell."

"No, I have promised that she shall come in the evening, if it be agreeable to you. But tell me about this wonderful occurrence."

"It happened last night," returned Louisa, "almost immediately after you were gone. Indeed, I would have sent a note or a message to the hotel to make you and Mary acquainted with the circumstance, only I have been expecting you to come all the morning, — and then, too, I have had so many other things to occupy my attention."

"But the way in which the cure was accomplished?" interrupted Mrs. Owen. "Surely the paralysis did not subside altogether in a moment, and of its own accord?"

"No," exclaimed Louisa. "It was a circumstance which for an instance seemed fraught with a terrible danger to me." Then suddenly checking herself, she threw her eyes hesitatingly and timidly upon Lilian, for the impression was still in her mind that this lady was the identical one who had saved her in the crypt and had brought her home on that memorable night in the minor canon's own carriage.

"You regard me as if you thought you knew me?" said Lilian, in her soft, gentle voice. "Ah! I know what idea is uppermost in your mind. Yes, we have indeed met be-

fore," she continued, taking Louisa's hand and surveying her with a mournful but tender interest. "I have to thank you for the forbearance which you showed in compliance with that anonymous note that I left for you — "

"Ah, lady," interrupted Louisa, "and I have to thank you for your timely succour upon that occasion."

"But about your aunt, my dear girl?" Mrs. Owen again observed.

Louisa gave no reply, but once more threw her looks deprecatingly and timidly upon Lilian.

"I begin to understand something," cried this unhappy lady. "A light breaks in upon me. Something has occurred in reference to him again? Speak, Louisa — Pardon me for addressing you thus familiarly, but you will presently learn that I have a right to do so. Speak, I say, fear not, tell us all that occurred."

"Since you desire me, I will do so," said the young maiden. "Last night, Mr. Audley — "

"Ah!" ejaculated Lilian, "I thought so. But go on, go on."

"Mr. Audley stole into the house, gained access to my chamber — "

"The villain!" muttered Lilian, between her set teeth.

"Do not interrupt," hastily whispered Mrs. Owen. Then turning to Louisa, she said, "Proceed, dear girl."

"His behaviour was most rude, most violent," continued our charming heroine, "but my screams accomplished that which the physician's art had for three long years vainly attempted. God would not suffer me to be injured, and those cries which I sent forth startled my aunt from the stupor of lethargy, loosened her limbs from the bonds of paralysis, and brought her in time to save me. Mr. Audley fled, no doubt conscience-stricken — "

"The villain!" again muttered Lilian Halkin. Then for an instant — but only for a single instant — an expression of fierce vindictiveness passed over her countenance.

"This is miraculous, truly wonderful," exclaimed Mrs. Owen, speaking with a kind of religious awe.

"Yes, the finger of Providence is indeed visible therein," observed Lilian.

"But you must now proceed up-stairs and see my aunt," said Louisa, hastily addressing herself to Mrs. Owen. "In-

deed, I have done wrong, perhaps, to detain you even for these few minutes in the parlour, for my aunt emphatically enjoined me to bid you walk up the moment you arrived. You are to go up alone. I am not to accompany you."

"But you will permit this lady, who is my sister," said Mrs. Owen, "to go with me?"

"Your sister?" exclaimed Louisa, in surprise, for Mary had never mentioned to her that her mother had any sisters living.

"Yes, this lady is my sister," rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But you will doubtless know more presently, my dear girl. At all events, she must accompany me."

Louisa offered no objection. It seemed to her that Mrs. Owen knew full well what she was doing; and the maiden moreover perceived that there was in all this proceeding a mystery of which she could form no idea, but which, according to the hints dropped, was presently to be cleared up.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin now quitted the parlour and ascended to the bedroom where Miss Stanley lay. Louisa did not follow, and the door closed immediately behind them. We need not penetrate into that room to describe the meeting of Lydia Halkin (which was Miss Stanley's real name) with her sisters Anne and Lilian, nor will we pause to describe all that took place between them. That the interview was affecting in the extreme may be full readily conceived, for Miss Stanley possessed a kind, a generous, and a forgiving heart, and whatever might have been the errors, the faults, or the crimes of her two sisters, she was not disposed to make them the subject of reproach and anger, but of compassion and pardon.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, during which interval Louisa remained below in the parlour, watching from the window with intense anxiety for the appearance of her sister. Presently her aunt's bell rang; the servant went up in response to the summons, and speedily came down again with the intimation that Louisa herself was wanted up-stairs.

The young maiden, now feeling a presentiment that she stood upon the threshold of the revelation of a mystery, and with a strange fluttering at the heart, ascended the stairs. Upon entering the room she at once saw that her aunt, Mrs. Owen, and Lilian had been weeping, but that there was a degree of affectionate tenderness in their looks which showed

that the interview had not been altogether without its pleasurable feeling.

"Come near, Louisa," said Miss Stanley. "Approach, dear girl. This is the day for revelations and the clearing up of mysteries. Know, then, that these are my sisters, therefore your aunts, and Mary Owen, who has so long been your companion and whom I am now so anxious to behold, is your cousin."

Louisa received these announcements with amazement, but speedily yielding to the impulse of her heart, she embraced first Mrs. Owen and then Lilian. These two ladies, one after the other, folded the sweet maiden in the fondest clasp and lavished upon her the most endearing epithets.

"Now you can retire again, Louisa," said Miss Stanley. "At a convenient opportunity I will explain to you certain things connected with the past which it becomes necessary for you to know. Retire, my dear child, and wait down-stairs to receive her whom you are so anxiously expecting."

The young maiden accordingly withdrew, but at the very instant she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard a knock at the front door. The visitors, whoever they were, had entered the garden gate and had arrived thus far during the scene up-stairs. With a wildly fluttering heart, Louisa opened the door, and the next instant she was caught in the arms of her sister.

"Dearest Clara!"

"Dearest Louisa!"

These were the ejaculations which sprang from their lips, and fervid, rapturous, and enthusiastic were the kisses which they exchanged, their tears also mingling. Then Louisa led her sister into the parlour, not noticing in the fulness of her joy that a tall, handsome young man was standing upon the threshold. He, however, followed the two sisters into the parlour, and with tears also in his eyes did he behold them embrace again and again.

"Oh, my beloved Clara, you have come home at last," murmured Louisa, in a broken voice, "and I am so happy. I received your fond letter — Ah! and I have such good news for you —"

Then she suddenly stopped short, as she observed the tall young gentleman who was standing near.

"Louisa, my dear sister," said Clara, taking her hand

and leading her toward him, " this is Sir Valentine Malvern, whom I mentioned in my letter. Although until this moment a stranger to you, yet when you learn the secret which I am come thus abruptly to breathe in your ears, you will receive him not merely with the kindest welcome, but with such feelings as a sister may experience toward a brother."

" Oh, Clara, what mean you? " asked Louisa, bewildered by her sister's words, and wondering whether they had already expressed her actual meaning in that allusion to sister and brother. " Our dear aunt was strangely affected when speaking of the late Sir Archibald Malvern."

" Louisa — our aunt — speaking? " echoed Clara, now in her turn contemplating her sister with the wildest astonishment.

" Yes, dear Clara, it is indeed all true," said the young maiden. " Last night our beloved aunt was released most miraculously, most providentially, from the spell of unconsciousness."

" Oh, what do I hear? " exclaimed Clara, flinging upon Louisa a strange look of mingled incredulity and terror. " Our aunt restored to consciousness? Ah! Valentine," she observed, abruptly turning toward the baronet, " how can I ever look that beloved relative in the face and tell her everything that has happened? "

" Clara, Clara," almost shrieked forth Louisa, " what is it that you say? Recall those dreadful words which have struck terror to my heart. Oh, you cannot have done wrong. No, no, it is impossible."

At this instant the door of the parlour was thrown open, and Mrs. Owen, accompanied by Lilian, having darted downstairs on hearing that half-scream from Louisa's lips, rushed into the room.

" Heavens! Lady Sackville! " exclaimed Mrs. Owen, in a voice of thrilling surprise.

" Lady Sackville! " echoed Louisa, wildly. Then fixing her eyes for a moment upon her sister, she shrieked forth, " O God, I understand it all! " and sank down senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

HERE we must interrupt the regular course of our narrative to chronicle certain events necessary to the elucidation of the mysteries belonging to the past.

Some four and twenty years previous to the period of which we have been writing, there was a family consisting of four sisters, named Halkin, residing at a short distance from the cathedral city of Rochester. Their Christian names were Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian. They had been left orphans at a somewhat early age, with a moderate income derived from an annuity purchased in the stock of some public company. Lydia, the eldest, was the only one of the four that had no claim to the possession of beauty, but in compensation for this absence of personal charms she possessed an amiable heart, an excellent disposition, and the purest principles of rectitude and virtue. Her three sisters, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian, were endowed with a rare loveliness, but, on the other hand, they were wanting in sound moral stamina. They had been well educated and genteelly brought up, and their accomplishments as well as their polished breeding qualified them all to move in the best society.

The extraordinary beauty of Anne, Melissa, and Lilian might also have justified them in the hope of forming good matrimonial alliances; but the giddy flirtations into which they were led with some young officers in garrison at Chatham (which town joins Rochester) materially damaged their character for prudence and propriety, and not only caused them to be spoken lightly of by many of their acquaintances, but also to be excluded from the parties given by those families whom they had been accustomed to visit. Lydia,

the eldest sister, beheld these results with anguish and foreboding, and earnestly remonstrated against the thoughtless course which Anne, Melissa, and even the young Lilian (then only fifteen) had pursued. But they treated her well-meant advice with the most unbecoming levity, and affected to regard the opinion of the world with extreme indifference.

The consequences were precisely those which might have been anticipated. The three giddy girls, more thoughtless than positively depraved, and not yet unchaste, were in their hearts sadly mortified at being actually cut by their former friends, and at finding that their respectability was gone. The transition from this state of feeling to that of recklessness was easy and rapid. Anne, the eldest of the three foolish young women, began to reason with herself that she was now past twenty, that all her prospects of forming a good marriage were blasted, and that any change in her condition could scarcely be of a very flattering nature. That is to say, she might become a tradesman's wife, or the mistress of a gentleman. The former proposal was submitted to her by a shopkeeper, who was too much enamoured of her beauty to think deeply of her damaged reputation, and the latter offer was made to her by a gentleman named Owen, who was staying in Rochester at the time, and was much smitten with her charms. Mr. Owen was not very well off, but he was remarkably handsome, and was related to the Leveson family; he was likewise most impassioned in his suit. Anne was glowing and voluptuous in temperament, and she accordingly fled from her home and accepted the protection of Mr. Owen.

This was a sad blow for the pure-minded and virtuous Lydia, but Melissa and Lilian openly declared that they thought their sister Anne had acted quite right. Lydia remonstrated with them, observing that with such ideas in their minds they themselves were preparing the way for their own ruin; and in her heart she deeply feared that Anne's example outweighed in its evil effects the good influences of her own advice and conduct. Soon after Anne's elopement with Mr. Owen, a young gentleman, passing by the name of Beckford, exceedingly handsome, and not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, came to pass a few weeks at Rochester. He lived in the most quiet manner, brought

no letters of introduction with him to any of the families in the city or neighbourhood, and did not appear to seek acquaintances. Yet he was evidently well off, for he was attended by his valet and groom, had a couple of horses, and passed the greater portion of his time in riding about the country.

During one of these equestrian jaunts he fell in with Melissa, as she was rambling out alone. We will not pause to say upon what pretext he addressed her. Suffice it to observe that, being smitten with her beauty, he did address her, and she displayed but little prudery on being accosted by so handsome a young man. Before he well knew who she was, or that she belonged to a family not overcelebrated for prudence or propriety, and one member of which had already eloped with a paramour, he fell so deeply in love with Melissa that he offered her marriage. This proposal she was by no means likely to reject, especially as she herself reciprocated that passion with an equal degree of fervour. They were accustomed to meet in the secluded walks and lanes in the vicinage of the cathedral city; and as Mr. Beckford (as he called himself) knew no one in those parts to tell him anything about the Halkin family, and, indeed, as he kept this little love-affair entirely to himself, he continued wooing, with every appearance of honourable intention, where in reality he might at first have achieved a conquest upon much easier terms.

We have said that Melissa soon learned to love him fondly, and this was the case. She adored him with all an impassioned woman's glowing affection, and she soon began to contemplate with pride and hopefulness the time when she was to become his wife. So vehement were his protestations of honourable intentions that in the midst of this glow of passion she still retained her chastity; and by thus repelling such advances as he made to possess her, she confirmed his belief that she was a young lady who must be wooed as a wife to be won at all. Thus went on this love-affair for some months, and at length Mr. Beckford told her that the reasons which had compelled him to remain in seclusion at Rochester had ceased to exist. Indeed, it was a chancery suit in which he had been engaged, which in its multifarious ramifications had threatened him with arrest for what is termed " contempt of court; " but the fault in the proceed-

ings having been amended, the suit terminated in his favour, putting him in possession of some property.

Such was the tale he told, and it was the true one. But he did not add, as he ought to have done, that the name of Beckford was a fictitious one, which he had temporarily assumed the better to avoid the inimical process of the chancery court.

He was now, then, about to leave Rochester, and he told some story as a reason for wishing that his marriage with Melissa should take place under circumstances of the strictest privacy. No matter now what the story might have been; it was one of those which false gallants under such circumstances have but little difficulty in devising, and so specious was it, that Melissa believed it. She communicated the circumstances to her sisters Lydia and Lilian. The former was at once suspicious, and recommended searching inquiries; the latter, naturally credulous to a degree, supported all Melissa's hopes and arguments that everything was straightforward. Even Lydia herself was somewhat if not entirely disarmed of her misgivings when Mr. Beckford was duly introduced at the house and proposed that the marriage should take place there, but under circumstances of great privacy. This was agreed to, Mr. Beckford undertaking to obtain the special license and bring the clergyman with him at the appointed hour. All these arrangements were duly carried out. Mr. Beckford came punctually to the moment with a post-chaise, and accompanied by the reverend gentleman who was to perform the ceremony. The special license was also produced, Lydia and Lilian acted as bridemaids, the rites were solemnized, and the happy Melissa was saluted by her sisters as Mrs. Beckford. She and her husband then entered the post-chaise and were whirled away to London.

On arriving in the metropolis, Melissa was introduced to a handsome house in a beautful suburban region, and there was she installed as its mistress. But in a few days Mr. Beckford urged the motives which he had before given on behalf of the private marriage as the reasons why he could not dwell altogether with her for the present. "He had a very particular and self-willed old father to conciliate, who would cut him off with a shilling if he knew of this marriage." Melissa, loving devotedly, and not wishing to see her husband frustrated in what he represented as his

"brilliant prospects," consented to all the arrangements he suggested; and he accordingly seldom spent the night at the house, although scarcely a day passed without his calling and staying several hours with her. Such was the influence he obtained over Melissa that he persuaded her to keep these circumstances secret from her sisters at Rochester when she wrote to them, and she did so. In due course the birth of a daughter, whom she christened Clara, gave her the occupations of a mother, and thus agreeably filled up the intervals when Mr. Beckford was absent.

Here we must interrupt that portion of the narrative which regards Melissa, in order to speak of Lilian. This beautiful but by no means steady-minded young creature remained with her sister Lydia at the dwelling near Rochester, and she also fell in with a handsome young gentleman who became enamoured of her charms. This admirer was named Bernard Audley. He was connected with the aristocracy, had been educated at Cambridge, and was shortly to be ordained for the Church. Lilian stood more than her other sisters had done in terror of Lydia, and Lydia herself, feeling a sort of maternal responsibility toward Lilian, who was the youngest, kept as jealous a watch as possible over the young damsel. Nevertheless, Lilian contrived to meet her lover in secret. He offered marriage, and she believed, but having less command over her passions than Melissa, she had not the moral strength to resist the overtures of Bernard Audley, and her virtue was accordingly surrendered to his keeping. He devised a well-concocted tale to account for his delay in making her his own, alleging that he was scarcely yet of age, entirely dependent upon his friends, and picturing nought but ruin for himself and utter poverty for both if he at present made Lilian his wife. The credulous girl believed implicitly all he told her, but when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she grew earnest in her entreaties that he would espouse her at any risk. Still he procrastinated the fulfilment of his solemn promise, and Lilian's situation grew day by day less tolerable and more desperate.

At length her sister Lydia began to suspect that something was wrong, though she was very far from conjecturing that matters were so bad as they really were. She had a serious conversation with Lilian, and the latter, in her utter despair, displayed a spirit which led to some little altercation.

To fly into a passion and assume a proud and independent bearing was the last resource of a young woman taken to task by an elder sister and dreading to be taxed with what was really the truth. It was not therefore the kind-hearted Lydia's fault that this quarrel took place. She said and did everything conciliatory, but though all the while displaying so rebellious a spirit, Lilian had not the real courage to throw herself into Lydia's arms and reveal the truth. At her next interview with Bernard Audley she gave way to her feelings to such an extent that he grew frightened, and when she besought him to take her away with him to some distant part, even if he could not make her his wife at the moment, he yielded to her demand. She fled with him, and Lydia, the eldest sister, was now left alone in her cheerless and forsaken abode. She would have followed Lilian, but could obtain no clue concerning her. She went to London and communicated the sad intelligence to Melissa, who was much affected. She likewise found out where her sister Anne was living with Mr. Owen, and to her also did she tell the tale. But Mrs. Owen (as she was styled) treated it with characteristic lightness, saying that she had no doubt Lilian had consulted her own happiness in the course she had adopted. Poor Lydia, well-nigh broken-hearted, returned to her forlorn dwelling near Rochester, to brood over her sorrows in secrecy and solitude.

Meanwhile Lilian had fled away with Bernard Audley. They were but mere girl and boy, neither of them being twenty-one at the time. The young man had a tolerable allowance from his parents, but he was naturally extravagant, as well as heartless and unprincipled, and his passion for Lilian soon cooling, he found her a burden. They travelled about from one fashionable watering-place to another, until the time arrived for Lilian to become a mother, and then she gave birth to a male child. Scarcely was she recovered from her confinement when her unscrupulous seducer proposed, without much circumlocution, that they should make away with their innocent offspring, as it was a sore burden upon them. She could scarcely believe her ears, and when he saw that she regarded him with indescribable horror, he affected to turn it off by declaring that he did but say so in jest and in order to try her.

Shortly afterward he abandoned her suddenly, leaving

her utterly penniless, and in debt at the lodging where they had been staying. Her anguish exceeded all powers of description, delirium fastened upon her brain, and in a paroxysm of frenzy, when utterly irresponsible for her actions, the unhappy creature but too faithfully followed out the accursed hint which she had received, and which was doubtless uppermost in her wildering thoughts at the time. She laid violent hands upon her child, and when the awful deed was done, her reason awoke to a full sense of its stupendous atrocity. She was arrested and conveyed to prison, but as she and Bernard Audley had been living under an assumed name, the statement, when first appearing in the newspapers, afforded her sisters no clue to the fact that she was the guilty infanticide, even if that statement met their eyes at all. When Lilian's trial, however, took place, her real name and that of her seducer transpired. She was acquitted of the charge, not precisely upon the ground of her delirious irresponsibility at the moment, but through some flaw in the indictment, and which was detected by the ingenuity of the counsel whom the sheriffs provided for her. She was accordingly set free without even a sentence of imprisonment, but still she went forth from her gaol with the brand of the murderess upon her brow.

When Lydia read in a newspaper the account of this trial, which account did happen to meet her eyes, she was at first overwhelmed with affliction; but summoning all her courage to her aid, she sped post-haste to the assize town where Lilian had gone through the fearful ordeal before the tribunal of justice. On arriving there, all she could learn was that the unhappy young woman, on being discharged, had instantaneously quitted the place, and no one knew what had become of her. Lydia accordingly returned to her cheerless home, now more cheerless than ever, because in her solitary hours she had the companionship of the most distracting thoughts. She likewise, poor creature, was destined to prove the truth of the old adage that misfortunes never come alone, for soon after the incident just related the public company whence her income was derived stopped payment, and speedily closed its transactions in bankruptcy, affording little better than a mere nominal dividend. Forthwith to Melissa (or Mrs. Beckford, as she was called) did Lydia hie to make known this fresh calamity, a calamity

which left her altogether denuded of resources. Melissa was, however, on the verge of confinement with her second child; and therefore Lydia, instead of obtruding her own sorrows upon her sister, remained to soothe and console her during the period of woman's painful ordeal. Another daughter was born, and was named Louisa.

But it was during the month following Melissa's accouchement that a fearful discovery was made, and most indiscreetly, as well as even abruptly, communicated to the invalid lady through the imprudence of the monthly nurse. This woman, who was intemperate in her habits, had nevertheless obtained considerable patronage amongst many of the ladies at the West End of London, and it so happened that she had attended on a certain Lady Malvern, the wife of Sir Archibald Malvern, a young baronet of considerable property but of somewhat dissipated character, who resided in Hanover Square. When Mr. Beckford called on Melissa, this monthly nurse at once recognized him as Sir Archibald Malvern. But he did not take any particular notice of her. His own son had been born about two years previous to the incident of which we are speaking. This interval had therefore elapsed since he had seen the nurse, and it was by no means probable that a gay, dashing, and thoughtless gentleman of the West End would recollect the countenance of an old woman. She, however, as just stated, knew him full well, and though she did not immediately betray the secret, nevertheless she retained it not thus sacred very long. Indeed, little more than a fortnight had elapsed since Melissa gave birth to Louisa when the old nurse, under the influence of spirituous liquor, let slip the fatal truth all in a moment, and Melissa, excited and agonized to a degree, at once saw in a hundred circumstances its dire confirmation.

Lydia was with her unhappy sister at the time and vainly endeavoured to soothe and console her. Shortly afterward the self-styled Mr. Beckford himself arrived at the house, and entering the room without previous announcement, according to his wont, was at once accused by the almost frantic Melissa of the treachery he had practised toward her. It was impossible to deny the charge, and his conduct, indeed, was all the less pardonable, inasmuch as, from what the nurse had stated, he must actually have been married at the time when the chancery suit had compelled him to

retire for a season to Rochester, and when he was therefore courting Melissa. Falling upon his knees, he confessed everything, passionately pleading the infatuation of his love as the only excuse he could offer for his treacherous conduct. His marriage, indeed, with Melissa had been a mere mockery, for though a special license was really obtained, as any one upon payment of certain fees can procure such a document, yet the individual who had acted as the clergyman on the occasion was an unprincipled, profligate fellow, a broken-down gentleman, in short, whom Sir Archibald Malvern had bribed to become an accomplice in the solemn but perfidious farce.

Such was the confession which the baronet made to the deceived Melissa, and in the hearing of the sorrowful but likewise indignant Lydia. To do him justice, he was overwhelmed with grief and stricken with remorse, for in truth he loved Melissa well, although in the selfishness and the heartlessness of that love he had made her his victim. He implored her forgiveness, vowing that he would ever continue his attentions toward herself, and a paternal care in respect to the children; and he besought that for his own sake and for that of his wife an exposure might be avoided. And Melissa did forgive him. Yes, so ardent and sincere was her love that she granted him her pardon. But in her weak and enfeebled condition at the time the blow was more than she could endure, and despite all the attentions of the eminent physicians whom Sir Archibald Malvern in his anguish and alarm summoned to attend upon her, she failed rapidly, and in a few days ceased to exist.

When the funeral was over, Lydia composed her half-distracted feelings as well as she was able, in order to have a serious conversation and come to a solemn understanding with Sir Archibald Malvern relative to a future provision for the motherless children whose care now devolved upon herself. The baronet at once desired her to specify the arrangements which she was anxious for him to make. Her future plans were already settled, and her notions in pecuniary matters were limited and economical. Nevertheless, her own sources of income having utterly failed through the bankruptcy of the public company, she found herself altogether dependent upon Sir Archibald Malvern. She therefore stipulated for an income of £120 a year, with

which she undertook to bring up the two children in a decent and respectable manner. To these terms Sir Archibald Malvern at once assented; but in order to guard against the possibility of the affair ever coming to the knowledge of his wife, he proposed that in drawing upon him periodically for the amounts due, it should be in the name of Beckford. To this Lydia could offer no possible objection, and the understanding was therefore finally settled between them.

Lydia then explained to the baronet the plan she had formed. She could not bear the idea of bringing up her nieces with the stigma of illegitimacy upon them, or that they should ever have to blush when in after years speaking of their parents. Moreover, as the family to which she belonged had in so many ways disgraced itself, and the name of Halkin was one which she could no longer bear in the world with pride and honour, though she herself had never tarnished it, yet she resolved to renounce it and take another. Besides, it was consistent with the notions she had formed relative to the bringing up of her two motherless nieces that they should never learn the profligacies of their two aunts, Anne and Lilian; and therefore it was desirable that the name of Halkin should at no time be identified with their growing impressions. It was for all these reasons that Lydia took the name of Stanley, broke up her home at Rochester, and removed with her two infant charges to the retired and secluded cottage at Canterbury. For the same reasons also was it that, as Clara and Louisa grew up, they were given to understand that their father was an officer in the army who had been killed in the Flemish wars, and that the shock produced by the sad intelligence had sent their mother to an early grave.

Before, however, Lydia Halkin quitted London, after Melissa's death, she found out her sister Anne, who was living with Mr. Owen, by whom she already had two children, Agatha and Emma, and to her did she communicate the lamentable tragedy relative to Melissa. Mrs. Owen was deeply affected at the intelligence, but Lydia, faithful to the plans which she had laid down, — and intent upon secluding herself henceforth entirely from the world, for the sake of the two children left solely dependent upon her, — gave Mrs. Owen not the least insight into her future

intentions nor made the slightest allusion to her intended change of name and removal to some other part of the country. Therefore, when all those arrangements were carried out, and Lydia with the pseudonym of Miss Stanley took up her abode at the retired cottage near Canterbury, in company with her two orphan nieces, Mrs. Owen altogether lost sight of her.

We should observe that to account for the girls bearing her own name, that of Stanley, their aunt represented herself, not as their deceased mother's, but as their father's sister. We may likewise remark that by dint of the utmost frugality she was enabled to give them as good an education as the best day-school for young ladies in Canterbury could afford; and as she herself was well versed in all branches of polite education and in many accomplishments, the instructions she was enabled to impart were immensely beneficial to her nieces. Nevertheless, as they grew up, Miss Stanley could not help occasionally noticing, with an inward misgiving and even presentiment, that Clara's disposition was not altogether so radically good as that of Louisa, but that the former was naturally of indolent habits, somewhat selfish and egotistical, with a tinge of duplicity; whereas Louisa's character was a compound of all the amenities, excellences, and amiabilities that can possibly combine to consolidate the principles of virtue and form a safeguard for woman's innocence and purity.

CHAPTER XIX

CONTINUATION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

Years elapsed, and, as the reader will remember, it was when Clara was nineteen and Louisa was seventeen that their aunt was stricken with paralysis, losing both speech and reason, and though living on, yet unconscious of all external objects and even of her own existence. Some months passed, and when the two sisters found their funds exhausted, Louisa called upon the Canterbury banker, and ascertained from him that Miss Stanley, the aunt, had been accustomed to draw half-yearly for sixty pounds upon a certain Mr. Beckford who resided in London. The banker, at Louisa's request, wrote a letter to Mr. Beckford, at No. 20, Hanover Square. During the long lapse of years which had intervened since Melissa's death, Sir Archibald Malvern had regularly received and honoured Miss Stanley's drafts. He had, however, bribed the postman never to deliver at his house any letters addressed to Mr. Beckford, but to leave them at a certain shop at the West End, where Sir Archibald dealt, and where he was wont to call at such times that the letters from Canterbury were likely to arrive. Upon receiving in this way the Canterbury banker's communication, he wrote, in the name of Beckford, to express his sorrow at Miss Stanley's illness and announce that thenceforth the joint draft of the two nieces would be duly honoured for the same half-yearly sum as heretofore. Lady Malvern was then still alive, and exceedingly jealous as well as suspicious; hence the maintenance of all these precautionary arrangements connected with the name of Beckford. Indeed, to guard the more completely against the discovery of his youthful amour and the treacheries that had characterized it, Sir Archibald was not wont to honour the drafts

through his own regular banker, but through the London agent of the Canterbury bank.

It was very shortly after he had written the letter just referred to, in reply to the Canterbury banker's communication, that Lady Malvern died, after a very brief illness; and although the same reasons now no longer existed for maintaining all the precautions so long persevered in, Sir Archibald nevertheless made no change in the plan of transmitting the money, simply because it was a convenient one and had grown habitual. Eighteen months more passed, and in the month of June, 1814, he himself met his death in the bathroom at the Blackheath villa, while engaged in his intrigue with Lady Ernestina Dysart. As a matter of course the next bill, sent by Clara and Louisa to London through the Canterbury bank, was returned unpaid, and the letters of advice addressed as usual to Mr. Beckford remained unnoticed. They lay at the tradesman's shop where the postman was wont to deliver them, and the tradesman himself, not dreaming of the horrible catastrophe in which Sir Archibald's life had closed, kept them, in the hope that he would call for them. The Canterbury banker wrote to his London agent to make inquiries, but the latter could learn nothing, and, by some oversight, neglected to inform his Canterbury correspondent of the fruitless result of his inquiries.

Then was it that, failing to obtain any satisfactory intelligence from London, the two young ladies held a long deliberation together, the result of which was Clara's memorable journey to the metropolis. On arriving in London, in the middle of July, 1814, Clara at once proceeded to No. 20, Hanover Square, and to her astonishment she learned that no such person as Mr. Beckford resided at the mansion, that he was not even known there, nor, indeed, did any person of that name dwell in the neighbourhood. Of course the name of Sir Archibald Malvern was altogether strange and unknown to Clara, and she was alike bewildered and dismayed. She asked to see Mr. Valentine, but from him she obtained no satisfactory information. Nevertheless, though so deeply absorbed in his own sorrows, arising from the then very recent and mysterious disappearance of Sir Archibald, he was inspired, not with a feeling of love and admiration for the beautiful girl, but with a sentiment of

profound compassion and sympathy on her behalf. It was as if the voice of nature was whispering in some faintly heard and unknown language in his soul, as accident thus threw him in contact with his half-sister.

From Hanover Square Clara Stanley proceeded to the London banker, but there her inquiries were equally futile. She issued from the bank in utter despair. Poverty stared her in the face, — not mere poverty in the mitigated acceptance of the term, but utter destitution and gaunt beggary. Nor did she dread these hideous evils for herself alone, but on account of her loved sister Louisa and her poor, helpless, bedridden aunt. For whatever faults Clara might have possessed, — and these were as yet scarcely developed, — she was endowed with a generous heart; and all the images of horror which in her deep desperation were forced upon her mind would have led her at once to make any sacrifice in order to avert the threatened ruin from herself and those she loved. Returning to Gracechurch Street to take her place by the coach for Canterbury, she was robbed in the neighbourhood of the booking-office. Her little all was now gone. Penniless in the streets of London, she had not even the means of paying the necessary deposit to secure a seat in the coach. Driven almost to madness, she hastened in pursuit of the individual whom she supposed to have robbed her. Vain attempt! and she soon became aware of the entire hopelessness of her endeavour to catch the pickpocket in the maze of the metropolis.

Pausing in the profoundest despondency to reflect upon what course she should pursue, Clara Stanley was accosted by an elderly woman whose respectable appearance and motherly demeanour at once gained her confidence. The female questioned her relative to the mournfulness of her looks, and Clara, in her inexperience of London life, was naturally overjoyed to find herself the object of so much apparent sympathy. She therefore unhesitatingly revealed the causes of her embarrassment, and the woman, struck by her exceeding beauty as well as by her unquestionable innocence, corroborated as it was by the artlessness of her tale, offered to befriend her. Clara, full of hope and fervent gratitude, accompanied the matron-looking female, and a hackney-coach being summoned, she was taken by her new friend to a handsome establishment in a large square.

Thus was it that Clara Stanley unconsciously fell into the hands of one of the vilest women in existence, for this human personification of hypocrisy was none other than Mrs. Gale, and it was to her house of fashionable resort that the innocent young lady was introduced.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Gale did not at once shock Clara's delicacy or awaken her suspicions by throwing her in contact with any frail creature who might at the moment have been in the house; but, installing her in a room to herself, she at once hastened away to Albemarle Street for the purpose of driving a bargain with the Marquis of Leveson for the sale of Clara's virtue. She failed, however, to see the marquis on the occasion, and was returning to Soho Square when she bethought herself of a certain commission which she had received some time previously from a lady of fashion at the West End and with whom she was acquainted. She accordingly, without a moment's delay, proceeded to call upon Miss Bathurst, at No. 13, Stratton Street, Piccadilly, for this was the lady alluded to. Miss Bathurst was at home, and at once gave an audience to Mrs. Gale.

" I have at length found," said the infamous woman, when closeted with Miss Bathurst, " a young lady who, if I mistake not, will exactly suit your requirements, whatever they may be. Into the nature thereof I do not pretend to inquire; but the beautiful creature whom accident has thrown in my way will be worth at least a couple of hundred guineas to me from the Marquis of Leveson or some other fashionable patron, and if you like to give me that sum this phœnix of perfection shall be placed in your hands for you to model her to suit your own purposes. She exactly answers all the points in the description you gave of what you wanted when you first entrusted me with the commission to obtain such a person. That she is innocence itself and of unblemished chastity, there can be no doubt. When you hear her artless tale from her own lips, as I have heard it, you will be of the same opinion.

" As for her beauty, I do not exaggerate when I pronounce it to be not only of the highest order, but likewise of the most voluptuous style, combined with a sufficient degree of intellectuality to redeem it from mere brute sensuousness. She has not a single fault. Tall in stature, inclined to be stout, and with a magnificent development of the bust, her

figure is yet characterized by elegance and grace. She says that she is only twenty-one, and she may be believed, but she looks two or three years older. Her teeth and eyes are incomparable; her complexion is of dazzling whiteness, but with a rich bloom upon the cheeks. The auburn of her hair is the richest that ever I beheld, and the outline of her features is classic. Her manners, though tinged with rustic bashfulness, are nevertheless ladylike and prepossessing, and require but the smallest amount of proper tutoring to render them elegant. Altogether she answers the description you gave me some time ago."

Miss Bathurst was overjoyed, and immediately concluded a bargain with Mrs. Gale, who hastened back to Soho Square, and with some ready excuse for the proceeding, took Clara Stanley at once to Stratton Street; so that the young lady issued from the vile woman's house not only as pure as she had entered it, but likewise without entertaining the remotest suspicion of the den of infamy where she had thus passed two hours on this memorable day.

It was still early in the afternoon when Clara was thus introduced to Miss Bathurst, and Mrs. Gale was at once dismissed with the stipulated sum in her pocket. Miss Bathurst has already been described to the reader as a lady midway between forty and fifty, retaining the traces of great beauty; and as her manners were elegant, her address fascinating, and her hypocrisy consummate, she was at once enabled to make a very favourable impression upon Clara. The young lady repeated to her new friend all that she had previously told Mrs. Gale, and in a short half-hour Miss Bathurst was fully acquainted with every point and particular of Clara's history so far as the fair narratrix was herself acquainted with it.

"Now," said Miss Bathurst, "you are a young lady of intelligence and of a strong mind, and you are for the instant in a most embarrassing position. It happens that I have it in my power — at least, I hope so — to place you in a career of brilliancy and splendour. So far from dreading poverty, you shall be surrounded with riches. So far from fearing that the sister and the aunt whom you love may become houseless and friendless, you shall have it in your power to maintain them in comfort and ease. Innocent though you are, you cannot be unconscious of the circum-

stance that you possess a loveliness of no common order, and that, so far from having been formed to dwell in the seclusion of a country cottage, you were destined to shine as a star in the brilliant circles of fashion. Will you leave yourself in my hands? Will you permit me to become your preceptress? The career which I purpose to open before you may lead to the most enviable position, — perhaps enable you to form some splendid matrimonial alliance."

Clara was bewildered by all that she heard, and her brain was half-intoxicated by this sudden elevation from the depths of despondency to the pinnacle of hope. But she craved further explanations. Miss Bathurst at once replied that she could not develop her projects all in a moment, that Clara must abandon herself to them in all confidence, and even give proofs not merely by that confidence, but also by her qualifications, that she was worthy of being entrusted with the important secret of her new friend's designs. Having thus spoken, Miss Bathurst, artfully availing herself of Clara's desperate position, put it to her to decide at once. " There was no time for delay. She might refuse or accept, as she chose. If she refused she must at once take her departure from the house, but when she found herself friendless and penniless in the wide streets of London, what would she do? Would she not be glad to come back and accept even a far less brilliant destiny and upon much harder conditions? "

Clara grew more and more bewildered. Miss Bathurst, following up her advantage, plied every argument, delineated every golden prospect, and used all her powers of persuasion as far as she was able.

" Do not think," she said, " that I am a mere paltry intriguante or a base trafficker in female virtue. Little as you know of London, you must perceive that this is a fashionable street, and a glance around will show you that this is a fine house, of undoubted respectability. Here is the Court Guide; you perceive my name in it. Behold these cards upon the table: they are those of my visitors, and you observe amongst them some of the highest names, male and female, in the British aristocracy. Here," continued Miss Bathurst, opening her writing-desk and placing several perfumed billets in Clara's hands, " are notes of invitation

to the noblest as well as the most fashionable houses. Here is even a note from the prince regent, written by his own hand, and accompanying that beautiful vase you see upon the chiffoniere and which he sent me as a present. You observe that he writes to me as ' Dear Miss Bathurst,' a distinguished honour only conferred on the favourites of that select circle which visits at Carlton House. Here is another note from his Royal Highness to my nephew, Mr. Horace Sackville, inviting him to dinner at the palace. See, the prince addresses him ' Dear Horace,' and concludes with ' Your affectionate friend.' But I need give you no further proofs of my own high position. It is now for you to judge whether you will put implicit faith in me. In this case you must make up your mind to remain in London; you cannot return home. An excuse for your absence can easily be made to your sister Louisa, and your aunt is placed, by her affliction, beyond all possibility of inquiring after you. Moreover, your letter to Louisa can enclose this bank-note for a hundred pounds, which will serve to corroborate whatever tale we may devise to account for your stay in London."

Clara hesitated no longer. Was it likely that she would do so? Bewildered by all she heard and all she saw, convinced by the many proofs placed before her of Miss Bathurst's social position and high standing in society, and also perceiving the real, tangible means of shielding her beloved sister and afflicted aunt from the menaces of poverty, the young lady blindly abandoned herself to her new friend's care, counsels, and tutorings, and at once signified her assent. It was yet time to save that day's post, and it was most necessary to do so, inasmuch as Louisa would be anxiously looking out on the following morning for a letter. Accordingly, Miss Bathurst's ingenuity at once suggested that Clara Stanley should pretend to have found the Mr. Beckford whom she had come up to London to seek, and that this person, whether real or imaginary, should, at all events, be made the alleged source of that bounty which the letter was to contain and likewise the cause of Clara's detention in the metropolis.

The young lady accordingly wrote to Miss Bathurst's dictation, her own ideas being very far from sufficiently collected to enable her to undertake the spontaneous authorship of such a letter. The reader will recollect that this

letter was given in full in one of the earliest chapters of our tale. The summary of its contents was to the effect that Clara had found Mr. Beckford, who was a kind-hearted, amiable, and excellent old gentleman, that it was entirely through a mistake, which he had explained, that the last cheque upon him was not honoured, that he had desired a bank-note for a hundred pounds to be at once forwarded to Canterbury, that Mrs. Beckford had insisted upon keeping Clara in London for a few weeks, and that the Beckfords had removed their residence from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street, to which latter direction Louisa must send her reply.

Such was the letter that Clara penned according to Miss Bathurst's dictation, and when it was sent off to the post and beyond recall, the young lady felt she had taken her first lesson in the school of duplicity. She therefore found it impossible to retreat, even if she were inclined. But she was not, for this new existence upon which she had entered speedily developed numerous and increasing charms for a young woman of Clara's disposition. The very next morning Miss Bathurst took her in a carriage to see Acacia Cottage at Knightsbridge, and as Clara was much pleased with the dwelling itself and its beautiful situation, the carriage whirled away at once to the house agent who had the letting of it. But while proceeding thither, Miss Bathurst said, "That beautiful cottage is to become your home so soon as it can be got ready. You must abandon your present name and take a new one, so as to destroy all identity between the future tenant of that house and the humble Clara Stanley from a secluded habitation in some corner of Kent. You must take a name at once aristocratic and fascinating. Let me think. When the tutorings to which you are to be subjected shall have given the requisite polished gloss to your manners, you will know how to mingle dignity with elegance, and your beauty will be at once splendid, queenly, and dazzling. And at this moment all that I have just said reminds me of a description I was reading this morning of the proud beauty of Venice, the Queen of the Adriatic. Now, then, the idea is excellent. Your Christian name shall be Venetia. It is an uncommon name, and at once gives the idea of a charming, elegant, and graceful woman. Well, then, you are

Venetia instead of Clara. But now for a surname. What think you of Montgomery? No, that is too long. Plantagenet? No, that would really appear to be assumed. Trelawney? Yes, an excellent name, Venetia Trelawney! Now, my dear friend, I have the infinite pleasure of shaking hands with the elegant Miss Venetia Trelawney."

Thus speaking, Miss Bathurst suited the action to the word and took the hand of the astonished and bewildered Clara Stanley, who, as a matter of course, had no objection to offer to the proposed substitution of nomenclature, seeing, as she did, that it formed a part of Miss Bathurst's still mysterious and unfathomable project. By the time this arrangement was made, and Clara Stanley had become in a few minutes transformed into Venetia Trelawney, the carriage stopped at the house agent's. There a bargain was at once made. Miss Bathurst haggled not at terms, but paid the requisite premium for the lease, which she ordered to be made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney, so that our heroine all in a moment found herself the lessee of Acacia Cottage. Then the carriage whirled away once more, and this time it was to an upholsterer's. The immense warehouses of splendid furniture were inspected by the two ladies, and Miss Bathurst was delighted to find that her young companion developed much excellent taste, notwithstanding the secluded life she had led, in expressing her opinion relative to the mode of furnishing the several rooms at Acacia Cottage. The upholsterer received orders to have the cottage furnished throughout within twenty-four hours. Five hundred pounds were paid in advance, with the intimation that the balance should be forthcoming on the completion of the order, and the receipt was made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney.

From the upholsterer's the carriage proceeded to a silversmith's hard by, and there a select quantity of plate was chosen, Miss Bathurst still consulting Venetia Trelawney's taste, and finding it to be really excellent. The bill was paid, the receipt being, as on the former occasion, made out in the name of Miss Trelawney, and the goods were ordered to be sent on the morrow to Acacia Cottage. From the silversmith's Miss Bathurst and Venetia proceeded to a fashionable jeweller's in Bond Street, and there our heroine was presented with a beautiful watch and chain, some rings,

a set of pearls, and various other articles, amounting altogether to more than a hundred guineas, for which Miss Bathurst's apparently inexhaustible purse furnished the amount, and again was the receipt made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. From the jeweller's the carriage proceeded to Miss Bathurst's attorney, she having, as she alleged, a few instructions to give that gentleman; but during her interview with him Venetia was left in the carriage, and therefore she knew not what the nature of the business was. Nor, indeed, did she devote a thought to the circumstance, for the strange rapidity of the incidents through which she was being whirled, as in a dream of fairy-land, kept her brain in a state of pleasurable excitement and blissful bewilderment.

From the lawyer's the carriage proceeded to a fashionable mercer's, and there large purchases were made. Morning and evening dresses, dresses likewise for walking and for the carriage, and every requisite of a fashionable lady's toilet, were chosen in no niggard manner and paid for without hesitation, the receipt being still made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. Thence away to Long Acre, where dwelt an eminent carriage-builder, and here a beautiful barouche in the newest fashion, and of the lightest and most elegant style, was purchased. But as Miss Bathurst was no judge of horses, but could put the utmost confidence in the carriage-builder, who had received her patronage for years, he was empowered to procure a pair with the least possible delay, so that the equipage might be sent complete to Acacia Cottage in forty-eight hours. The acknowledgment for the amount paid on this occasion was, as heretofore, made out to the credit of Miss Trelawney.

The greater portion of the day was thus occupied, and when Miss Bathurst and Venetia returned to Stratton Street it was time to think of dinner. Our heroine was now introduced to two ladies who had come to stay with Miss Bathurst. One was Mrs. Arbuthnot, whom Miss Bathurst introduced to Venetia as her future companion, inasmuch as it would be imprudent and might provoke the tongue of scandal were she to dwell alone at her future residence of Acacia Cottage. The other lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert, formerly the mistress of the prince regent, but who had for many years altogether ceased even from seeing him. She

was upwards of sixty, but still retained the traces of an extraordinary beauty, and preserved a fine embonpoint, into which the once voluptuous grandeur of her charms had expanded. Venetia did not then know that Mrs. Fitzherbert had been so intimately connected with the prince, for she was utterly unversed in all the rumours and scandals of court life. But Mrs. Fitzherbert treated Venetia with a kind of affectionate attention, and also surveyed her with the deepest interest; and when dinner was over she and Miss Bathurst placed Venetia between them on the sofa, and not merely began to give her what might be termed lectures upon the manners of high life and the etiquette of the best society, but also, gently and delicately, as well as with much apparent kindness, mentioned to her any little faults they had noticed in her deportment at the dinner-table. These were very few indeed, and were rather little awkwardnesses than positive solecisms in good breeding, and Venetia, who possessed a rare appreciation as well as an extraordinary intuitive quickness on such points, at once profited by the hints and suggestions thrown out. Thus the evening passed away, and our heroine retired to her chamber well wearied with the bustle and excitement of the day. Scarcely, therefore, was her head laid upon the pillow, when she fell asleep, and thus had no time for thought.

The whole of the next day was passed indoors. Milliners and dressmakers were in attendance, and to these auxiliaries of the toilet did she have to devote some time. About noon Miss Bathurst's lawyer was announced, and that lady, taking Venetia aside, addressed her in the following manner:

"My dear girl, you saw yesterday the immense outlay which I made on your account, and which, when the rest of the bills are paid, will have absorbed more than two thousand guineas. Now, I mean to be very frank with you. You suddenly find yourself a comparatively rich woman, for you have a splendidly furnished house, a beautiful equipage, plate, jewelry, a varied and costly wardrobe, and everything necessary to commence housekeeping in the handsomest style. But this is not all. Here is a banker's book, and you will find, if you open it, that a thousand guineas have been paid in to your account. All this shows you that nothing has been done by halves, and at the same time you can form an idea of the enormous amount expended in setting

afoot my plan. Well as I think of you, my dear Venetia, yet you must nevertheless remember you are a total stranger to me, and I am about to place unlimited confidence in you. At starting, therefore, I make it a purely business matter, and my lawyer has prepared a bond, which you will sign, and which makes you my debtor to the extent of three thousand guineas. Of course I shall never expect payment direct from you, but this bond will enable me to reënter into possession of all the property wherewith I am entrusting you if at any time you should endeavour to deceive me. It is a mere precaution, and as you doubtless mean fair play, there can be no harm in your signing it. My lawyer is waiting in another room, and when you have gone through this little formality, I will give you full and complete explanations of the whole project which I have in hand, and for the carrying out of which your assistance is engaged."

Venetia made no objection, and accompanying Miss Bathurst to the dining-room where the attorney was seated, she signed the bond. The lawyer took his leave, and when he was gone, Miss Bathurst proceeded to address Venetia in the following manner:

" Start not, my dear Venetia, when I inform you that some years ago I was upon terms of the closest intimacy with the prince regent. In fact, I was his mistress. But our connection came to an end, and with it ceased all the influence which for the time it gave me. Mrs. Fitzherbert was likewise for some years on the same footing with his Royal Highness. No, not exactly on the same footing, for whereas I was only secretly and privately his mistress, she was openly and publicly acknowledged as such. Her influence during the period of her connection with his Royal Highness was far greater than mine, and the loss of it, when that connection ceased, has even been more profoundly felt by that lady. A complete rupture has for the last twenty years existed between herself and the prince, but as you have seen by the letters from his Royal Highness which I have shown you, he still now and then deigns to think of me. Were I to ask a favour of him, however, I should experience a refusal, or else a cold neglect which I do not choose to draw down upon myself.

" Now, you must know that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself have reason to regret our total loss of influence at

court, for we have numerous relations and friends for whom we wish to provide in the various departments of the civil and military services. For a long time past we have taken counsel together, in order to devise some scheme to regain, though indirectly and through the medium of another, at least some portion of our lost interest with the prince regent. After varied deliberations we resolved upon a certain scheme, all the points and bearings of which we duly discussed, so as to mature our plan and render it ripe for execution whenever we should find the fitting agent for carrying it out. I accordingly gave instructions to a certain Mrs. Gale, a shrewd, deep-seeing, and active woman, to procure for me a young lady of matchless beatuy, elegant manners, fashionable appearance, and strong mind. It was no ordinary being that was thus sought after. There are plenty of beauties about the court already, and therefore for our purpose it needed one whose loveliness should transcend anything which ever came within the sphere of the prince's view. Months have passed since I gave that delicate but important commission to Mrs. Gale, but at length she has succeeded in the discovery of the perfect creature so necessary to the success of these plans. Mrs. Gale is the woman whom you encountered the day before yesterday in Gracechurch Street, and you are this phœnix of perfection."

Here Miss Bathurst paused for a few moments, while the colour gradually mantled upon Venetia's countenance, for the young lady now began to comprehend her destiny. As a matter of course, her mind was not sufficiently depraved to receive these explanations, so significant in their tendency, without a partial shock, but this effect of her better feelings was speedily triumphed over and subdued by the sense of gratified vanity, as well as by the certainty of present riches and splendour, and with the prospect of ascending to the most brilliant position. Miss Bathurst, who watched her with the keen, searching eye of a thorough woman of the world, read what was passing in her soul, and speedily saw that Venetia was her own.

"To-morrow," she continued, "you will go and take up your residence at Acacia Cottage, and in a very few days the whole West End of London will be ringing with the intelligence of a most lovely but mysterious star suddenly appearing in the galaxy of London life. The very mystery

which will hang around you cannot fail to give an enormous impulse to the excitement and the sensation you are to create. No one will know who you are or whence you come. There will be no clue to your parentage, your connections, or your friends. People will hear that you have honourably paid for everything in fitting up your establishment, and that you are well off. They will therefore see that you are no mere adventuress. Mrs. Arbuthnot, a prudent, far-sighted, and matronly-looking woman, will be your companion, living with you altogether, riding out with you in your carriage, and accompanying you in your walks, and therefore the breath of scandal cannot injure your fair fame.

"Thus far all circumstances will be propitious to you at the outset, and from that starting-point everything will depend upon yourself. You will have the dissipated members of the nobility seeking your acquaintance, but you must repulse them all. Hauteur to one, coldness to another, mocking disdain to a third, indignation to a fourth, and so on. Away with them all! Then you will receive tender billets beseeching interviews, making overtures of love, some in their infatuation proposing marriage, others offering to settle large sums upon you as an inducement to become their mistress. But every letter must either be returned to its writer, or else treated with stern silence. By these means you will obtain a reputation for a virtue as inaccessible as your charms are brilliant. In a few weeks the whole West End will be talking of you. But in the meantime you will have much to do. For a month to come you must every day practise music and drawing. You already possess a good elementary knowledge of these arts. Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is proficient in both, will speedily render you proficient also, for you must become eminently accomplished, as well as having the recommendations of personal loveliness and the strictest chastity. Then, too, you must read all the fashionable literature of the day. A large assortment of books necessary for these polite studies will presently go down to Acacia Cottage. Fashionable novels must form the principal portion of your reading, so that you may speedily catch an idea of the frivolities and the thousand and one elegant nothings which may be that to make up the sum of a fashionable existence. In these readings you will be assisted by Mrs. Arbuthnot, and you must never hesitate

to ask her for explanations when you find yourself at fault. You must likewise read Peerages and accounts of the aristocracy, as well as the fashionable newspapers and the court journals, so that you may obtain an insight into the histories and the proceedings of all the first families, for you know not how largely such matters enter into the conversation of high life. You possess an excellent memory, and whatever you study you will retain. You have also a quick intellect, and will speedily appreciate all the salient points in these subjects for your study. With your quickness and natural shrewdness, with your powerful mind and expansive genius, you will in a very few weeks complete what may be termed your fashionable education.

"But still this is not all. You must study before your mirror, as well as in books and journals. You must practise the airs, the looks, and the demeanours which are to be adopted to suit all occasions and likewise all emergencies. You must tutor that beautiful face of yours to seem disdainful at one moment, and softly winning at another; you must make those lovely eyes of yours flash fire at will, or droop into an expression of languor more softly sensuous than is even their natural wont; and you must apply the same plastic art to your coral lips, so that they may wreathe in smiles, curl with scorn, or be compressed with an air of subdued indignation. You must likewise study your attitudes, and practise movements and gestures; and in all this, do not forget that a large portion of your self-teachings is in preparation for the time when you will have to play the artillery of your charms upon that heart against which they are ultimately to be directed. Mrs. Arbuthnot will tell you how the whitest and most beautifully rounded arm may be set off to the best advantage by a particular gesture or attitude; how the finest, the whitest, and the most voluptuous bosom may be likewise displayed by a particular position; or how the daintiest feet and ankles can be shown by particular movements, the possessor all the time appearing unconscious of the circumstance. I do but glance hurriedly over these details. Mrs. Arbuthnot will go further into them with you, and in her will you find a proficient as well as willing and patient instructress."

Again Miss Bathurst paused, but rather to gather breath than to ascertain how Venetia received all she said; for the

satisfaction of the young lady was depicted in her countenance, Venetia being well pleased with the part which she had thus to play and the routine chalked out for her to pursue.

"As a matter of course," resumed Miss Bathurst, "you will form no friendships and receive no guests without previously consulting me; but as it will be better that your acquaintance with me should be kept as secret as possible, you must come but seldom to Stratton Street, and then only of an evening, as Mrs. Arbuthnot can be the means of constant communication between us. And now let me continue my explanations relative to the hoped-for results of all these preliminary arrangements. I have already said that you will soon become the topic of universal conversation throughout the fashionable world, and in proportion to your coldness and reserve toward all who seek your acquaintance, will grow the general anxiety to form it. The name of Venetia Trelawney will be in the mouth of every one, and when you ride in the park you will be the cynosure of general observation. The greatest ladies in the land will be mad with jealousy, because they will hear their husbands, lovers, and acquaintances all talking and thinking of nothing but Venetia Trelawney. You will become a favourite toast at dinner-parties and at the clubs, the fashionable newspapers will have paragraphs concerning you, your dress will give hints for the fashions, milliners and dressmakers will quote your good taste, and thus will the name of Venetia Trelawney become a perfect *furor* and rage.

"In due course, the prince regent will hear of you. My nephew, Horace Sackville, who is intimate at the palace, will not fail to drop hints and allusions to pique the prince's curiosity. You shall be introduced to Horace in a day or two; but he will not, when conversing with the prince or elsewhere concerning you, let it be known that he has the honour of your acquaintance. And, by the bye, talking of Horace I shall not mention to him how I became acquainted with you," added Miss Bathurst, for she did not wish her nephew to know that she had any knowledge of such a character as Mrs. Gale. "Nor, indeed," she continued, "must Horace visit you at Acacia Cottage. Nothing, in short, must be done in the shape of imprudence or indiscretion in any way calculated to betray the fact that I am at

the bottom of all this. For if the real truth were to transpire, the prince, who is uncommonly keen, would at once see through the whole design, and our purpose would be defeated. Well, my dear Venetia, you must now fully understand what I mean," added Miss Bathurst, " or, if you wish, I will be explicit to the end. And perhaps this course is the best. In plain terms, then, you are destined to become the mistress of the prince regent."

The deepest crimson now mantled upon Venetia's cheeks, but delight also beamed in her looks, joy dancing exultant in her sunny eyes, and her bosom heaving with a long sigh of pleasure. If the still small voice of conscience, whispering for a moment, touched a chord which vibrated to her heart and sent up that carnation glow to her cheeks, this voice was nevertheless almost instantaneously hushed by the louder tones in which ambition spoke in that same heart, and the thrilling pæans of triumph which resounded through her soul.

" Yes, you are destined to become the mistress of the prince regent," proceeded Miss Bathurst, " and no matter what remonstrance rigid virtue may offer or cold prudery may suggest, it is a brilliant and an enviable position. I say enviable, for there is not a titled beauty in the sphere of aristocracy that will not be madly jealous of you, and to be jealous, is to envy. You will be courted and fawned upon even by those who will hate you most, and of the male sex you will become the idol, the goddess, the divinity. Now, mark me well. If, with all the opportunities thus afforded, you play your cards judiciously and with tact, you cannot fail of success. When the curiosity of the prince is sufficiently piqued concerning you, he will devise some means to seek your acquaintance. Perhaps he will call upon you, without any formal introduction at all. So much the better; you will then have him in your power, and may stipulate your own conditions. If he falls madly in love, as he assuredly will, you can obtain anything at his hands, even to becoming a peeress in your own right. But we will not waste time in all these conjectures; the main point is for you to follow the career in which you will be placed and the advice which will be given you, and it is inevitable that the whole plot will succeed. It must succeed. But mind, one false step will ruin everything, one single act of imprudence will mar

all. It is only by achieving the extraordinary popularity I have described that you will be talked of in the prince's hearing, and then will Horace be enabled to serve us by still further piquing his curiosity. But if you yield to the overtures of any other individual, if you suffer yourself to be dazzled by any offers that may be made to you, if, in a word, you compromise your reputation and thus gain the character of an adventuress or an intriguante, you will fail to inspire that curiosity and sustain that prolonged excitement and sensation which can alone lead to success.

"And if successful, Venetia, only think of the advantages to be gained! They are incalculable. Your own position will of course be brilliant, and then must you labour on behalf of those who will have been instrumental in raising you to this summit of grandeur. For remember, it is I and Mrs. Fitzherbert who together have advanced these large sums of money to carry out our design; it is we who have rescued you from poverty and destitution, your sister and your aunt also, and are now placing you on the highroad to fortune, rank, and influence. Therefore, when that position shall have been secured to yourself, you must exert your power with the prince to provide pensions and places for those whom I and Mrs. Fitzherbert may point out, and through you shall we thus regain some portion of our departed influence. Now, Venetia, my explanations are complete. I do not ask you whether you have the capacity and the qualifications to enter upon a career where tact, judgment, delicacy, and shrewdness are as necessary as personal beauty itself, because in these respects I already know you to be well fitted for the purpose. But I do ask you whether, after all you have heard, you can enter, heart and soul, upon the enterprise and give yourself up to it with enthusiasm and devotion?"

With but little compunction, and with a pleasurable sensation infinitely outweighing it, Venetia replied in the affirmative, and her destiny was thus fixed.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

Behold Venetia now installed at Acacia Cottage, and entering upon the routine which Miss Bathurst had chalked out and the pursuits which she had so elaborately detailed. Mrs. Arbuthnot became ostensibly her companion, but she in reality served also as Miss Bathurst's spy, so as to watch all Venetia's actions and make her report accordingly in Stratton Street. But our heroine proved too faithful to the cause in which she had embarked, and to the important interests stalked upon the enterprise, to commit any error or be led into any fault that needed reporting. Indeed, she proved an apt and docile pupil, not merely because she would not risk the agreeable position in which she was placed, but likewise because she had now her own ambition to gratify.

An experienced, wily, and astute lady's-maid, in the person of Miss Jessica, had been found for Venetia, and as this abigail was thoroughly trustworthy and unsurpassingly discreet, she was well fitted for the service she had to perform. The man servant chosen for Venetia's household was severe and morose enough to daunt any impertinent questioner, and at the same time old and ugly enough to avert the possibility of scandal on his account; for inasmuch as ladies of rank, fashion, and beauty full often convert their handsome footmen into lovers, a similar imputation might have been raised against Venetia had her male dependent been young, of good figure, and of prepossessing countenance. Every arrangement was thus made and every precaution taken by Miss Bathurst not only to retain a complete hold upon Venetia, but likewise to guard her reputation against the chance of calumny.

Our heroine's studies progressed most rapidly. All her habitual indolence seemed shaken off, and Mrs. Arbuthnot found her most assiduous as well as most intelligent in the various branches which she had been enjoined to cultivate. For Venetia, as above stated, not only had her ambition to gratify, but also to expel disagreeable thoughts; and hence her unwearied application to her music, her drawing, the books that had been provided for her, and her studies in all the fashionable refinements of demeanour, attitude, and manner. We have already described her as possessing a vigorous intellect and the keenest appreciation of all that was necessary for her to learn in order to play with proficiency the grand part entrusted to her; and it can therefore be no matter of surprise if in the comparatively short space of a couple of months she should have undergone the completest transformation from the inexperienced Clara Stanley of a humble dwelling at Canterbury into the brilliant Venetia Trelawney of Acacia Cottage.

When occasionally visiting Miss Bathurst of an evening, Venetia met Horace Sackville. And here we may as well observe that this young man was the illegitimate son of Miss Bathurst, but the prince regent was not his father. Indeed, this fact his Royal Highness knew full well, for it is to be hoped, for the honour of humanity, that if it had been otherwise, that is to say, if Horace were really the prince's son, the prince never would have intrigued with his own son's wife. Horace's father was another person with whom Miss Bathurst had been intimate in her time, but the young man himself had never been suffered to learn the exact particulars of his birth. He had been all along taught to believe that he was an orphan, indebted to the bounty of his aunt, Miss Bathurst, and as he grew up he had not chosen to ask many questions upon the subject. The liking that the prince took to him was merely one of the royal whims and caprices, and as Horace had many natural good qualities, and never took an improper advantage of the prince's favour, he did not forfeit it. From all that has transpired throughout our long tale relative to the character of Horace Sackville, it will be seen that he was endowed with all the necessary qualifications to render him an amiable, worthy, and even high-minded young man, had not his good principles been warped and the best feelings of his nature

spoiled by the contaminating dissipations and profligacies of the sphere into which he was thrown.

From the very first moment that Horace Sackville beheld Venetia, he was struck with her transcending loveliness, and, indeed, he at once conceived a profound attachment toward her. This he however veiled to the utmost of his power, because Miss Bathurst had duly initiated him in the purpose for which Venetia was destined, although the little circumstance relative to Mrs. Gale was carefully kept out of sight. Horace was too much accustomed to follow the instructions and obey the wishes of his aunt, as he called her, not to enter at once into the plans which she and Mrs. Fitzherbert had so artfully devised, but he could not prevent himself from loving Venetia secretly and tenderly, and the more he saw of her the deeper grew his affection. Still, he continued to keep this passion to himself, and, faithful to the positive instructions he received from Miss Bathurst, he forbore from calling at Acacia Cottage, or even hinting to any of his friends that he had the honour of Miss Trelawney's acquaintance.

Everything that Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert had foreseen, in arranging their plans, actually took place. Venetia Trelawney soon excited an immense sensation at the West End. All the noble roués and fashionable rakes were soon busied in making inquiries concerning her, and endeavouring to obtain an introduction. But all they could learn was that she had suddenly taken Acacia Cottage, fitted it up splendidly, and paid honourably as well as liberally for everything. Of course Miss Bathurst had enjoined her upholsterer, jeweller, carriage-builder, and other tradesmen to maintain the strictest secrecy relative to her acquaintance with Miss Trelawney, under the penalty of losing the said Miss Trelawney's future custom, and these injunctions were very faithfully adhered to.

Thus nothing could be learned relative to Venetia's antecedents; no one knew who she was, or whence she came, yet no one dared to assert that she was an adventuress or an intriguante. If this suspicion arose for a moment, it was very soon set at rest by her own conduct. Never did she appear in public without her duenna-like companion, Mrs. Arbuthnot; it was found impossible to obtain access to her, and the numerous billets which she received were either re-

turned in blank envelopes, or else treated with cold silence. So infatuated became many very wealthy but very silly personages that they at once wrote to offer her marriage. These were the letters which she sent back. Other epistles, making less honourable overtures, were those that obtained no notice whatsoever. All these circumstances got abroad, thus stamping her to be as virtuous as she was incomprehensible. No one could accuse her of endeavouring to thrust herself into good society, because she shunned all those who might have introduced her to the very élite of fashion. Thus the *furor* she excited fully equalled, if not transcended, all the most sanguine expectations of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Meanwhile Horace Sackville was prudently and cautiously helping on the affair. It was he who had dexterously spread the tale relative to Venetia's refusing the dazzling overtures of a certain duke, and he had likewise on two or three occasions thrown out a hint concerning her to the prince regent.

Thus did the first two months of Venetia Trelawney's residence at Acacia Cottage pass away, and then occurred the memorable " Banquet of Six " at the Marquis of Leveson's House in Albemarle Street. On that occasion Venetia Trelawney's name was brought up, but Horace Sackville suffered the other guests to lavish their encomia upon her marvellous beauty ere he volunteered a word. Then, on being directly appealed to by the prince, he said all he could to pique his Royal Highness's curiosity to the fullest extreme, artfully insinuating that if any one could possibly win her upon any terms at all, it could be none other than the prince himself. If the reader will refer to that chapter in which the Banquet of Six is described, he will find how skilfully Horace Sackville played his part upon the occasion, and at the same time how narrowly he watched the prince's countenance, not merely to observe the impression made by all that was passing, but likewise to make sure that he himself did not go too far and thus excite suspicion as to his covert motive. We need not recapitulate all the details of those circumstances under which the memorable love-campaign was agreed upon and the six thousand guineas clubbed to become the reward of the successful aspirant to Venetia's favours.

As a matter of course, everything that thus took place

was duly made known to Venetia on the following day, and she received her instructions from Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, how to act. It was now decided that she should permit herself to become accessible to her suitors, so that by discouraging those whose turns preceded that of the prince her conduct might the more effectually pique his curiosity and rivet his interest. Thus on the Monday, which was the first day of the love-campaign, when she beheld the Earl of Curzon in the park, evidently trusting to the chapter of accidents to furnish him with some means of obtaining access to her, she purposely let her parrot loose to afford him the wished-for opportunity. He was not slow in availing himself of it, and then Venetia had an occasion of playing off upon him all the artillery of those airs of haughty indignation, proud defiance, and cold contempt which she had been practising for more than two months. It was a pleasure for Venetia to humble the self-sufficient nobleman who dared hope to vanquish her who was destined for a far loftier position, and she did humble him. Then, as he went away, her peals of silver laughter proclaimed her triumph.

The next day was the turn of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and as Venetia had heard his character from Horace Sackville, to the effect that he was a good-natured, generous-hearted, offhand, though dissipated young man, she was resolved to treat him very differently from the Earl of Curzon. Moreover, as he actually went and gave a very considerable sum in the purchase of Acacia Cottage and other houses, the whole being salable only as one lot, and this on purpose to obtain a pretext for calling upon her, she felt somewhat flattered by the compliment thus implied, and therefore, when he appeared in her presence, she treated him with the most affable display of good temper. This amiable humour was encouraged on her part by his own conduct, for, as the reader will recollect, he frankly, and we might almost say bluntly, offered her marriage. She had therefore no reason, as indeed she had no desire, to be offended with him; she even took a sort of liking to him, and treated him with a good-natured raillery, which disarmed him of all possible resentment on account of the refusal which his proposition received.

Relative to Colonel Malpas, whose turn came next, Venetia had received a very different character indeed, and she

learned from Horace that he was a thoroughly unprincipled, bad young man. She wished to have an opportunity of settling all his pretensions at once; and as he was intimate with Lady Wenlock, between whom and Mrs. Arbuthnot a long-standing friendship existed, it was easy to have a hint conveyed through that lady to the colonel that Venetia was to be present at the entertainment given by her at Kew. There did Venetia accordingly meet the colonel, but she certainly was not prepared for the detestable menaces to which the unprincipled scoundrel had recourse; and had it not been for the circumstance of Captain Tash being an ear-witness of all that took place, her reputation might have subsequently suffered by the daring assertion of triumph eventually made by the colonel.

Before we continue our explanations relative to the love-campaign of the party of six, we must pause to notice another little incident the date of which properly causes it to require allusion here. We mean the visit which Jocelyn Loftus paid our heroine at No. 13, Stratton Street. Miss Bathurst had given all her servants the requisite instructions what to say in case any one should call and inquire for a Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, or a Miss Clara Stanley. The answer was invariably to be, "that they were out of town, but were shortly expected home." This was the response which Jocelyn received when, provided with Louisa's letter of introduction, he called on the Wednesday in Stratton Street; and returning next day, he was duly introduced into the handsome drawing-room, where he found Clara Stanley. The reader will remember that they were well pleased with each other, for the young lady assumed the most artless, amiable, and unaffected manner, so that she appeared everything that Jocelyn could have expected in his beloved Louisa's elder sister. On the other hand, the good opinion she had previously conceived from Louisa's letters respecting Loftus, and also from the references she had taken concerning him, was fully corroborated by his looks, his manner, and his discourse. She had learned from his banker that he was a young man of good family, with an income of six hundred a year, and still greater expectations; therefore she had from the first highly approved of his suit in respect to Louisa. Now, as above stated, a personal acquaintance ratified all the favourable impressions previously made on

her mind, and she rejoiced unfeignedly that her beloved sister should have won the heart of so excellent a young gentleman. She excused herself for not introducing him to Mr. and Mrs. Beckford on the ground that they were very old people and much fatigued with their excursion into the country on the preceding day; and as Loftus, being but little acquainted with the personages and circumstances of fashionable life, entertained not the remotest idea that he was in the house of a Miss Bathurst, as a matter of course he beheld nought to engender suspicion that any duplicity was being practised. But, ah! when he had taken his departure, how quickly did the long pent-up feelings in our heroine's bosom seek an issue in a flood of tears, and how convulsive were the sobs that her surcharged breast gave forth!

But Venetia had no leisure for thus abandoning herself to her grief, or to the flood of memories relative to her sister and her home, which this interview had so painfully excited. For it was now past noon, and she must get back to Acacia Cottage. Because this was Thursday, the fourth day of the love-campaign, the grandest and most important of all. It was the day, in short, for the prince's visit; for that he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at once there was but little doubt. The reader may remember with what admirable tact she played her cards upon this occasion. She gave him to understand that she was no mere adventuress, no wanton, but as yet a pure virgin; and this was the truth. She however frankly confessed that she had her ambition; and she alluded to the connection between Mrs. Fitzherbert and himself as illustrative of the position which she must stipulate for if she became his mistress.

Then the prince suggested that she should get married to some easy, good-natured person who would either wink at her being the royal mistress, or else positively assent to it. This proposition was fraught with exceeding pleasure for Venetia, inasmuch as she saw that matrimony might be made a sufficient cloak to preserve her reputation, and also (as she hoped) to save her well-beloved Louisa the pain of ever having to blush for her sister. She had for some time observed the affection which Horace Sackville entertained toward her; and, therefore, the instant the prince regent's proposition was made, it struck her that Horace was the convenient husband to be thus obtained. She knew that

his infatuation with regard to her was immense, and though she was no stranger to his natural good qualities, yet she was equally well aware that these had been too much warped and spoiled to be suggestive of any very powerful scruples against a marriage under such circumstances. As to the consent of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert to this marriage, she had little doubt of obtaining it; inasmuch as the main point was that she should become the prince regent's mistress, no matter by what means, so long as the aim was successfully and speedily reached.

The reader will remember that ere the prince parted from her on that occasion he extracted from her a promise that she would visit him at Carlton House on the ensuing evening; and she was to be at Hyde Park corner at nine o'clock, where his carriage was to meet her. But previous to all this, previous, indeed, to calling upon her at all, and therefore while still unaware of the extraordinary beauty of Venetia, as well as being under the infatuation of the lady in the gossamer dress, the prince had made a compact to abandon his chance to the Marquis of Leveson. Now, however, having become an eye-witness of the truth of all the reports that had reached him concerning Venetia's charms, his Royal Highness repented of his bargain with the marquis, and, hastening to visit him, induced his lordship to forego the compact on condition of receiving the vacant Garter.

The prince, however, quite forgot, when returning to Carlton House, to confer the appointment. The marquis thought he was tricked, and on the Friday evening, it being his turn to pursue the love-campaign, he treacherously inveigled Venetia to his mansion. She, however, escaped his clutches, but upon proceeding to Carlton House, she would not abandon herself on this occasion to the prince, fearing that she had not as yet a sufficiently strong hold upon him, and that too easy a surrender would damp his ardour with respect to her.

Venetia did not at once communicate to Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, the arrangement which had been made with the prince about her getting married. She merely intimated that they had come to terms and that she was to be his mistress. She was resolved to wait and see whether Sackville himself would make any tender avowal to her, in which case she would be spared the somewhat un-

feminine task of initiating overtures to him. Besides, she did not wish him to come ready tutored by Miss Bathurst how to act, but she was desirous of assuring herself that Horace would of his own accord accept her as a wife. She felt assured that, inasmuch as he had been dragged into the transaction of the party of six, he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at the cottage, with or without his aunt's consent. She therefore expected him, nor did she expect in vain.

Horace called, and although the conversation began with the observation on his part "that he was the only one who could not plead the suit of love," they nevertheless very soon found themselves deep in a discourse of a tender character. As we have already stated, the passion which Sackville entertained for Venetia amounted to a frenzied infatuation which made him reckless of any terms or conditions which might be attached to such an alliance, and therefore, though knowing everything, aware that she was to become the mistress of the prince, and that she was far too deeply involved in the ramifications of the plot, as well as too securely in Miss Bathurst's power, to think of retreating, he enthusiastically agreed to become her husband.

Then, on the whole arrangement with the prince and with Sackville relative to this matrimonial project being made known to Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert, they cheerfully gave their assent. Indeed, closely connected as Horace was to the former, an additional guarantee for Venetia's continued thraldom to her will seemed to be afforded by such a marriage. Here we need not dwell upon the details of what followed. The reader is well aware how Venetia married Horace Sackville, how he was raised to the peerage, and how they took up their abode at Carlton House.

The next incident which requires explanation refers to that occasion when the prince gave a dinner-party, at which the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Marquis of Leveson were present, and when Venetia overheard a certain conversation between the marquis and his Royal Highness. It will be remembered that the marquis had just returned from Paris, and startling indeed for Venetia were the circumstances which he and the prince on that occasion hurriedly discussed. She learned, in the first place, who Jocelyn Loftus really was, and the revelation immedi-

ately accounted to her for a certain mysteriousness which she observed in the manner of his London banker when some months previously she had called upon that gentleman to take references concerning her sister's suitor. Nevertheless, the discovery now made as to who Jocelyn really was rendered her more satisfied than ever in respect to his projected alliance with Louisa.

But, in the second place, she ascertained from what passed between the marquis and the prince that Loftus was a prisoner at the prefecture of police in Paris, that he had been assailed by extraordinary temptations, of which the profligate Misses Owen were made the agents, but that he had passed immaculate through the ordeal.

In the third place, Venetia discovered that Louisa had been inveigled away from home, that she had been to Paris, that the marquis had brought her back, and that she was at that very moment at his mansion at Albemarle Street.

Lastly, our heroine overheard Lord Leveson go on to state "that Louisa had got a sister somewhere in London, but that there was evidently a mistake relative to the accurate address of this sister's abode."

On hearing these things, Venetia could not altogether restrain the feelings of mingled terror, indignation, and alarm which they were but too well calculated to excite in her bosom. Indeed, as the reader will recollect, she upset her wine-glass in her agitation, and precipitately quitting the room, hastened to her boudoir. There she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction; but seeing the absolute necessity of acting with a promptitude that should avert the threatened storm from breaking over her own head, she at once despatched Jessica to Miss Bathurst to put that lady on her guard relative to the inquiries which were certain to be made in Stratton Street concerning Miss Clara Stanley. Having taken this precaution, she made up her mind how to act in other respects, and, confident of wielding immense power over the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she resolved to enlist their aid in carrying out the twofold purpose she had in view. One object was to rescue her sister from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson, and the other was to effect the liberation of Jocelyn Loftus from the prefecture of police in Paris.

But in the carrying out of both these aims, the utmost

tact, prudence, and judgment were required, in order to avoid compromising herself. In the former case she saw that it was almost certain that the Marquis of Leveson, being himself intimately acquainted with Miss Bathurst, would insist upon full explanations as to all Louisa had told him relative to her sister residing at No. 13, Stratton Street, with persons of the name of Beckford; or else Louisa herself might discover that Clara was not there, nor any such beings as the Beckfords in existence. Therefore, in entrusting Sir Douglas Huntingdon with the delicate task of rescuing Louisa from Leveson House, Venetia was compelled to take him entirely into her confidence. To secure him, however, altogether in her interest, and more effectually to put the seal of secrecy upon his lips, she made up her mind to bestow upon him those favours for which he languished; and in coming to this resolve, she also yielded somewhat to her own inclinations, for the barriers of virtue being completely broken down, it needed but a small impulse thus to urge her on to the gratification of the sensuous passion she had conceived for the baronet. As the reader, however, will recollect, she accidentally gave Lord Curzon the note intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon, so that the nobleman, availing himself of an invitation which he thought was meant for him, was the first to revel in her arms.

This circumstance she did not altogether regret, because, in the first place, Huntingdon proved well satisfied to serve her faithfully and effectually upon the mere promise of a crowning reward, while, in the second place, it was equally necessary to secure the secret devotedness of Curzon in carrying out her object with regard to Loftus. Indeed, the management of this latter affair required as much fidelity as courage. From Louisa's letters, Venetia had learned all that Mary Owen had told her relative to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales, and from those letters likewise had Venetia ascertained the object of Jocelyn's visit to the Continent. But it was only with great risk and danger to her own position and interests that Venetia could act in a manner hostile to the prince regent's views, and to espouse Jocelyn's cause was to adopt that hostile course. Hence the imperious necessity of sealing Curzon's lips relative to the task she entrusted to him, and consequently she regretted but little the misadventure which had at once thrown her

into his arms, for she knew full well that when the service was performed in Paris, he would be sure to come back and claim that same favour as his reward.

The Earl of Curzon, flushed with the triumph he had achieved in at last winning that splendid and seductive woman, cheerfully undertook the commission entrusted to him; and engaging the services of Captain Tash and his man Robin, at once set off for Paris, where he accomplished the deliverance of Jocelyn Loftus in the manner described in an earlier part of our tale. But inasmuch as it for obvious reasons suited Venetia's purpose that Jocelyn should remain ignorant of who the authoress of this proceeding in his favour might be, and that he should obtain no clue to the eventual discovery thereof, his liberators were instructed to disguise themselves personally and also conceal their names, all of which they did.

But in the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon was engaged in the execution of the task that Venetia had confided to him. We must, however, first observe that, as Venetia had foreseen, the Marquis of Leveson went to No. 13, Stratton Street, and seeing his old friend, Miss Bathurst, told her " that a girl named Louisa Stanley was at his house, and that she persisted in declaring that her sister Clara was residing with a certain Mr. and Mrs. Beckford there, at the said No. 13, Stratton Street." Miss Bathurst could not conceal her dismay at this announcement, for she naturally fancied that Louisa would persevere in her inquiries after her sister, that the marquis would aid her, and that a complete discovery and exposure would ensue. In this dilemma Miss Bathurst threw herself upon the mercy of her old friend the Marquis of Leveson, and confided to him everything, beseeching his assistance in devising some excuse to satisfy Louisa and divert her from further inquiries relative to her sister. The marquis, secretly overjoyed at having elicited such an important revelation, which suddenly put the brilliant Venetia (as he hoped) completely in his power, readily promised to further Miss Bathurst's views. He of course had nothing to gain by giving publicity to what he had thus discovered, but, on the contrary, it was by keeping the secret that he expected to reduce the haughty Lady Sackville to submission.

Reassuring Miss Bathurst as to the course he should

adopt, he returned to Albemarle Street, and represented to Louisa that her sister Clara was out of town with the Beckfords for a week or ten days. Miss Bathurst immediately sent to Venetia to tell her what had occurred, but in the interval Sir Douglas Huntingdon had received our heroine's instructions to rescue Louisa at any risk, and no matter under what circumstances, from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. She had likewise desired him to take Louisa at once to Stratton Street, and thither did Venetia herself repair, to resume her character of plain and simple Clara Stanley once more, and await her sister's coming. We have seen how Sir Douglas arrived at Leveson House in the very nick of time to deliver the beauteous young maiden from the unprincipled old nobleman, and how in his own carriage he bore her to Stratton Street, telling her on the way that her sister Clara had unexpectedly come up to town.

We need but cast a brief retrospective glance over the meeting which then took place between the sisters. On that occasion Clara assured Louisa that her lover Jocelyn was innocent of the base things imputed to him, that he had passed scatheless through the ordeal of unparalleled temptations, and that he himself would in due time reveal what his real name was, and give satisfactory explanations for having adopted an assumed one. She likewise gave Louisa the assurance that he would shortly be free; and in every respect did she do her best to cheer and console her well-beloved sister.

Venetia was then about to touch upon matters intimately concerning herself. She saw how dangerous it was to keep her sister in the dark on that head any longer, and that the time was come when she should give at least some explanations respecting her own affairs. She purported, indeed, to announce the important fact that she was married, that she was a peeress, and that her husband occupied a high post in the prince regent's household. But suddenly the artless and innocent Louisa began to give utterance to everything that Lady Ernestina Dysart had told her relative to " a certain Venetia Trelawney, now Lady Sackville and mistress of the prince," so that the unhappy young woman, horrified at hearing her own history thus dwelt on so pointedly by her unsuspecting sister, could not for worlds have found courage to make the revelation a moment before

resolved on. With a hastily devised apology for bidding Louisa so abrupt a farewell, and with the old standard excuse for not presenting her to the Beckfords, she lost no time in sending her off to Canterbury.

The next incident to which we must call attention was one connected with the private theatricals that took place at Carlton House. On that occasion, be it remembered, Jocelyn Loftus, when there for the purpose of seeking an interview with the prince, recognized Clara Stanley in the brilliant Lady Sackville. His astonishment knew no bounds and for Louisa's sake was he deeply, deeply grieved. Having seen the elder sister's letters from London to his beloved Louisa, he knew that this dear girl was utterly ignorant of Clara's career under the name of Venetia, and he therefore at once formed the resolve not to enlighten Louisa upon the subject on his return to Canterbury. He did not then foresee that a second visit to the Continent would be prolonged for seven months, and he thought that it would be better to wait until his return ere he made so startling a revelation to his betrothed as that her own sister and the Venetia of whom she had heard so much evil were identical. Nor did he present himself to Lady Sackville on this occasion, but he wrote her a long letter, the receipt of which affected her greatly.

The reader will remember it was on the same occasion when she found the Marquis of Leveson's pearls in her boudoir that Jocelyn's letter came to hand. Therein he observed, in grave but what might be termed brotherly remonstrance, that she had evidently practised many deceits and strange duplicities toward her confiding sister, but that still he was not disposed to blame her too severely, as the whole tenor of her conduct proved that she not only continued to love that sister well, but had kept her aloof from her own sphere of brilliant dissipation. Jocelyn went on to say, in his letter, that he should not reveal to Louisa's ears, at least for the present, the discovery he had made, that it was probable he should have to leave England for a few weeks, but that on his return he should seek an interview with Lady Sackville, in order to arrange the best means of communicating the secret to Louisa. Loftus then proceeded to observe that inasmuch as Lady Sackville had learned from her sister's letters many of the particulars respecting the fearful

conspiracy then in progress against the honour, happiness, and even the life of the Princess of Wales, it was her bounden duty, possessing as she did an all-powerful influence with the prince regent, to do her best to awaken him to a sense of duty, and at least persuade him to forbear from direct persecution against his unfortunate wife, even if he chose to continue separated from her.

Such was the substance of the letter which Jocelyn Loftus wrote on that occasion, and Venetia felt all the latent generosity of her nature aroused on behalf of the Princess of Wales. She moreover calculated that if she could succeed, by secret and indirect means, in breaking up the conspiracy, it would be a deed to tell materially in her favour, not only in the estimation of Jocelyn Loftus, but likewise in the opinion of her sister Louisa when the day should come for making the announcement that herself and Lady Sackville were one and the same person. But for the reasons above set forth, Venetia could not possibly work otherwise than insidiously and privately against those conspirators of whom her royal lover was at the head. To be detected in espousing his wife's cause would be to risk her position at the palace, and to be expelled in utter disgrace from the atmosphere of the court. She therefore resolved to employ the Earl of Curzon once more, and at the same time accident again brought Malpas to her notice. On this occasion it was as a broken-down spendthrift and a ruined man that he stood before her, and much as she detested the colonel, she nevertheless regarded him as an instrument exactly fitted for her purpose. She knew how thoroughly unprincipled he was, and that he would hesitate at nothing in order to carry out a purpose, while his necessities seemed to place him altogether at her mercy. Hence the commissions which she gave for the Earl of Curzon and to Colonel Malpas to proceed to the Continent, and, by worming themselves into the favour of the profligate Misses Owen, seize any opportunities that might occur of withdrawing them from the sphere where their presence was so fraught with danger.

We have now no further explanations to give relative to Venetia's career, nor to elucidate the mysteries of her conduct on past occasions. We may, however, pause to observe, ere concluding this chapter, that from the moment she became the royal mistress she was enabled fully to carry

out the designs of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. All the relatives, even to the remotest cousins of these two ladies, were well provided for. Pensions, places, and sinecures were conferred upon some, quick promotion in the military and civil services was obtained for others. The prince grumbled sometimes at these demands upon him, and sometimes he contented himself with merely expressing his astonishment that Venetia should use her interest almost exclusively on behalf of two families. But he never refused compliance with her requests. The last demand that she made upon him ere her visit to Canterbury was to have Miss Bathurst's name placed upon the pension list, and as Horace was so closely related to that lady, the prayer did not seem unnatural on Venetia's part. The prince grumbled for a few moments, and at length yielded his consent, so that the name of Elizabeth Bathurst was speedily introduced upon the pension list for an income of seven hundred pounds a year, " in consideration of the eminent services of her late father," who was a general in the army, but being a mere drawing-room soldier, had always managed to command garrisons at home, and had never seen a hostile shot fired in his life.

Altogether, down to the period at which we have brought our narrative, Venetia had more than fulfilled the expectations which Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert formed when they devised the memorable intrigue that wafted her upon the glowing sea of fashionable life. The three thousand pounds which those two ladies had advanced for the equipment of the charming vessel that was thus launched had been amply repaid fifty-fold in the rich cargo which it was constantly bearing into port, and thus was the original design crowned with the most extraordinary success.

CHAPTER XXI

CLARA AT HOME

Clara Stanley was now at home once more. Yet she no longer bore the name of Stanley. She was the titled Lady Sackville, wife of an English peer, and surely this humble cottage could scarcely be called a home for her who had been accustomed to dwell in the gilded saloons of Carlton House.

Yet when her sister Louisa was recovered from the swoon into which she had fallen on the discovery that Clara and Venetia were one and the same person, yet, we say, did the charming and ingenuous girl pour forth ten thousand cordial welcomes for the long absent one who had returned again. With floods of tears did Clara strain the charming girl to her bosom, while their half-brother Valentine and their two aunts, Mrs. Owen and Lilian, all stood by deeply affected. The mystery relative to Valentine Malvern was speedily cleared up, and the amazed Louisa, on comprehending the degree of relationship in which she stood to the young gentleman, received his fraternal embrace.

Mrs. Owen undertook the task of proceeding up-stairs to prepare the way for Clara's interview with her invalid aunt; and without entering into details, we need only say that in a few minutes Clara herself hastened to the sick-room, and was received in the arms of that fond relative who had for so many years supplied to her the place of her lost mother.

In the course of the evening of this memorable day, Clara gave her three aunts her entire history, as in London, on the previous day, she had given it to Valentine Malvern, of course suppressing all those particulars relative to the Marquis of Leveson, Colonel Malpas, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, which she would have perished rather than

reveal. Louisa was not present when Clara thus performed the painful duty of reciting her narrative to her three aunts, and it was not until the sisters had an opportunity of being alone together in the evening, and when seated in the shady arbour in the garden, that Louisa obtained any insight into that strange, romantic, and even wondrous career which had elevated her sister to the peerage. Nor will the reader blame Clara if she withheld as much as possible of the details that were most likely to shock the pure mind of her innocent and artless sister. Nevertheless, she could not conceal the circumstance of her intimate connection with the prince regent. Louisa's generous disposition naturally suggested as many excuses as possible for the errors into which Clara had been led, and it was in some such terms as these that the young damsel gave expression to her feelings:

"I can picture to myself, dearest Clara, the bewilderment of horror and dismay into which you must have been thrown when suddenly finding yourself homeless, friendless, and penniless in the streets of London; and never can I forget that you have now told me in language of the most touching pathos how it was for the purpose of saving myself and our then paralyzed and helpless relative from the direst penury that you threw yourself at the mercy of that Miss Bathurst who made you such brilliant promises. Whatever you may have done, then, must receive no reproach from my lips. No, dearest, dearest sister, never can I reproach you. On the contrary, a veil must be drawn over all that it is unpleasant to look back upon. But, tell me, oh, tell me from your own lips, give me the solemn assurance that you will never return to the royal palace, and then I shall be happy, truly happy."

"Louisa, you talk to me like an angel," exclaimed Clara, winding her arms about her sister's neck, and straining her in the fondest embrace. "When I crossed the threshold of Carlton House this morning, I solemnly vowed in the depths of my soul that I was then taking leave of that palace for ever."

"Oh, Clara, if you will only keep this vow," cried Louisa, "you will more than atone for the past."

"I will keep it," was Lady Sackville's firm and sincere response. "I have already given our dear aunt that same assurance, and she also has forgiven me, she also has prom-

ised to overlook the past on those same terms. Whatever amount of ambition I may have once entertained has been more than gratified. I have shone in the sphere of fashion, I have been the star of courtly circles, and my soul is sated with the dissipations thereof. So far from experiencing a pang, it is with delight that I hail my emancipation from the golden chains in which my late position held me enthralled. Farewell, then, for ever to that sphere of fashion! Farewell for ever to that courtly circle! I have every reason to believe that my husband, who, in sooth, possesses many excellent qualities, Louisa, will likewise be well pleased to retire into the comparative seclusion of domestic life. We possess rank, and a revenue which for all our purposes may be regarded as a handsome fortune. And now, too, that the past is known to my dear relatives, that I no longer harbour secrets which keep the soul in a constant tremor lest some accident should betray them, I feel happier than I have been for a long, long time past. Oh, Louisa, is not this a day that will be ever memorable in our existence? It is on this day that your sister has been restored to you, that I have brought a brother to embrace you, and that, all the mysteries of our birth being cleared up, we find that we have two other relatives in Mrs. Owen and Miss Lilian Halkin."

"Yes," observed Louisa, in a low voice full of emotion, "it is indeed a memorable day. But it will not the less prove a happy one for me if you, dear Clara, will indeed consent to retire from the sphere of fashion and dwell henceforth in the midst of domestic enjoyments."

"And you think," whispered Clara, in a subdued and tremulous tone, "that the virtuous, the high-minded young man who is shortly coming to make you his wife will consent to acknowledge me as his sister?"

"Oh, can you for a moment doubt it?" asked Louisa, in a tone gently reproaching Clara for even having entertained such an apprehension.

"I know he will do everything for your sake, Louisa," rejoined Lady Sackville, "and therefore, when you assure him of my good resolutions for the future, he will not only believe you, but will treat me with kindness. Oh, there is a secret that trembles upon my tongue, but I will not reveal it. No, it shall be for your lover himself to choose his own

good time, and also adopt his own manner, to make you acquainted with his real name and explain wherefore he ever assumed a fictitious one."

"Yes, that is his secret," said Louisa, "and from his lips only must I receive the revelation. Besides, I experience no undue curiosity in that respect, for whatever may be his real position in life, it is he only whom I love, and if he never revealed himself to me as aught besides simple Jocelyn Loftus, that affection would sustain no diminution."

In this manner did the two young ladies remain conversing for some time, until the servant who had been despatched to the Fountain Hotel returned with Mary Owen. And now was this young lady enabled to clasp Louisa in her arms and call her by the endearing name of cousin. Then Clara was presented to Mary Owen, also as a cousin, and they embraced; but infinite was the surprise of the young girl to hear of the identity of Louisa's sister with the brilliant Lady Sackville. Nor less was she amazed to learn that Sir Valentine Malvern was the half-brother of the two sisters. Yes, it was indeed a complete family party assembled at the cottage that evening; and although there were naturally many painful memories, yet the circle of united relatives was not without its experiences of present happiness and of hope for the future.

Clara took up her abode at the cottage in order that she might not even for a few hours be separated from her sister. Mrs. Owen, Mary, and Sir Valentine Malvern returned to the Fountain Hotel, and Lilian repaired to her humble lodging at the peasant's hut. On the following day Clara passed many hours in writing. She addressed a brief letter to the prince regent, taking an eternal adieu of him, thanking him for the many kindnesses she had received at his hands, beseeching that he would adopt no measures in the hope of recalling her to Carlton House, and concluding with the intimation that her husband would explain to him her motives for so suddenly abandoning a court life and retiring into comparative seclusion. She next wrote a letter to Miss Bathurst, stating that the drama in which she had played so conspicuous a part was now at an end, never to be resumed, — at least by her; and she likewise terminated with the remark that Horace would give all requisite explanations. She then drew up a very long, earnest, and touching

letter to her husband, telling him everything that had occurred, her motives for so suddenly leaving London, and her unchangeable resolve to withdraw altogether from the theatre of her former triumphs. She reminded him of the many touching scenes which had occurred between them, and which had proved at the time such chastening and salutary episodes amidst the career of dissipation and profligacy that they had been pursuing. She used every argument and called into requisition every possible appeal to persuade Horace to resign the stewardship in the royal household and lose no time in joining her at Canterbury, so that they might debate upon their future plans. With reference to the debts which Horace might have contracted, she stated that Sir Valentine Malvern's liberality would ensure the speedy settlement of them all, and that, indeed, her half-brother had generously volunteered to become Horace's banker the moment she hinted to him the existence of such liabilities. Finally she explained the contents of the letters she had written to the prince regent and Miss Bathurst, leaving it to Horace to give just such explanations as he might think fit.

In penning this correspondence a large portion of the day was passed. In the evening the family party reassembled again, and now the memories of the past were less painful, and the happiness of the present more real, while the hopes for the future seemed brighter.

On the following day Mrs. Owen and Mary said farewell and took their departure for Dover, whence they were to embark for the Continent on their way to Geneva. Valentine Malvern also said his adieus to the inmates of the cottage, and set out for London as the bearer of Lady Sackville's letters. Lilian paid but a brief visit to her sister and nieces this day, and appeared more melancholy than usual; but when affectionately questioned as to the cause, she merely observed that she felt a deep despondency of spirits, as if a presentiment of evil were weighing on her mind, and then somewhat abruptly took her departure.

Miss Stanley, for by this name did she still resolve to pass, as the resumption of her real one of Halkin would only excite disagreeable attention amongst the people of Canterbury, had so far recovered her strength that she was now enabled by the assistance of her two nieces to descend from

her chamber, and supported between the magnificent Clara and the charming Louisa, she walked forth into the garden, thus breathing the fresh air of heaven for the first time after a long interval of three years.

For the present must we take leave of the cottage near Canterbury, and again direct the reader's attention to the mighty world of London, for we have yet many things to relate and many characters to dispose of ere we can bring our labours in this narrative to an end, and prepare to draw up the curtain upon some new drama for which our imagination is yet stored with so many materials.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SICK-BED

RETURN we now to the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson in Albemarle Street. The nobleman himself was awaiting with a considerable degree of anxiety the result of a consultation which those learned and excellent gentlemen, Doctor Thurston and Doctor Copperas, were holding together in the Crimson Drawing-room. The object of this consultation was the very dangerous aspect which the illness of Lady Ernestina Dysart had assumed, and the marquis, who had always been attached to his niece, entertained the utmost apprehension on her account. Moreover, as she had been assailed by frequent fits of delirium, at which times she had said in her ravings many things that must have sounded extremely strange to the ears of the two physicians when in attendance upon her, the marquis was not a little afraid that they might fancy those things to have a somewhat more substantial foundation than the mere fevered imagination of her ladyship, and thus did he await with a painful anxiety and suspense the result of the consultation they were now holding.

But let us peep into the Crimson Drawing-room and behold the manner in which the two physicians conducted this important deliberation. Refreshments had been placed upon the table, and while Doctor Copperas was profoundly engaged in the anatomy of a cold fowl, Doctor Thurston was as scientifically occupied with experiments upon the contents of a pigeon-pie. The marquis's brown sherry likewise appeared to come in for its share of attention, and while thus comfortably occupied, the two physicians discoursed in the following manner.

"Well, my dear Thurston," observed Doctor Copperas,

" I think you and I have played uncommonly well into each other's hands for some years past."

" And we have feathered our nests accordingly," answered Thurston. " But I very much fear that our profession, to which we are so deeply attached, is menaced by a variety of newfangled doctrines."

" No doubt of it," replied Copperas. " We must write down all attempts at innovation. Wherever we see an individual propounding doctrines calculated to simplify the medical art and destroy its delusions, we must gibbet him unmercifully in the professional publications."

" Oh, of course," rejoined Doctor Thurston. " Not but that the present system will last our time. We are, however, in honour bound to hand it down intact to the rising generation of medical men. Fees, my dear friend, are the very life and soul of our profession."

" To be sure, and so here is success to fees," said Doctor Copperas, pouring out another glass of sherry.

" And consultations, too," added Thurston. " We must always recommend the propriety of consultations in any doubtful cases."

" By the bye," interjected Doctor Copperas, " was it not uncommon good the other day, when the old Dowager Countess of Catamaran cut her thumb with a penknife, and I persuaded her that a consultation was absolutely necessary? I knew she was good for a fee of ten guineas each, and that she liked the solemnity and importance attendant upon a consultation. Besides, she was in a desperate fright. So I thought I would humour her."

" Do tell me how you managed it," said Doctor Thurston, laughing.

" I will," said Doctor Copperas. " But, to start from the beginning, I must tell you that her ladyship's fat footman came puffing and blowing in the greatest consternation to my house, declaring that her ladyship had met with a most serious accident, and beseeching that I would come directly. So away I went, and on arriving at Catamaran House, I found her ladyship stretched upon the sofa, with two lady's-maids bending over her, one binding a cambric handkerchief around her hand, the other bathing her head with vinegar and water, while three French poodles, instinctively feeling that something was the matter with their beloved mistress, were

standing up with their forepaws against the sofa, all whining piteously. I assumed on entering my most solemn looks, and advancing up to the sofa, asked, in that low, lugubrious tone which we, friend Thurston, know so well how to assume at times, what was the matter? The two lady's-maids burst into tears, the countess groaned audibly, and one of the poodles, leaping up on her, knocked the basin of vinegar and water out of the maid's hand. This little incident aggravated her ladyship's misery, but she begged and besought that the poor dear darling duck of a pet — meaning the vile, ugly French poodle — might not be hurt. ' Poor dear,' she murmured, in a voice as if she were about to give up the ghost, ' it would break its little heart to be scolded.' Well, the liquid being wiped off her ladyship's splendid satin dress, she said, in a dying tone, ' Oh, dear Doctor Copperas, I am so glad you have come. I was mending a pen, when the knife cut a great gash in my thumb, and I am afraid that the blade was the least, least thing rusty. Tell me, dear doctor, whether you think there is any danger.' I shook my head gloomily, observing that it would not be proper for me, either as her ladyship's friend or professional adviser, to declare that there was no danger, but I would do my best to avert it. She said ' that, thank God, she was resigned to the worst,' and I accordingly proceeded to examine the wound, one of the maids having with exquisite care and tenderness removed the cambric bandage.

" Really I had some trouble in preserving my gravity, but seeing a consultation in the perspective, I shook my head again, said something about the danger attendant on a cut from a rusty knife, and dropped a hint about the possibility of lockjaw. The countess groaned, her maids once more burst into tears, and the poodles whined; but I bade her ladyship and the servant-girls muster up all their fortitude, while I endeavoured to tranquillize the poodles by patting them, narrowly escaping, however, a bite from one which snapped at me. Her ladyship then asked me if I did not think she had better go to bed. I felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, and told her gravely that there was certainly fever, and she had better do so, although she was really in such a good state of health that she could as easily have devoured the whole of this cold fowl as I have now eaten the two wings. Well, she went to bed, and I took my departure, having left a pre-

scription. Of course I gave her some medicine to make her feel uncommon uneasy, and when I called again in the evening she had, as I foresaw, worried herself into a very decent state of fever. Again I prescribed and went away, leaving orders that I was to be fetched, no matter at what hour of the night, if her ladyship should feel at all worse. As a matter of course, the instructions I thus gave terrified her ladyship into a still higher state of fever, and at seven o'clock in the morning I was hurriedly fetched. Then it was I gravely recommended a consultation. The countess asked me whom I would like to have called in. I affected to deliberate with myself, and after a brief pause said that I did not like to recommend any particular individual in such cases, but that if there were one who more than another had specially devoted himself to the dangers attendant upon severe injuries with sharp instruments, that eminent individual was Doctor Thurston. You know the rest."

Doctor Thurston laughed with a sort of inward chuckle at this narrative, and again the two learned physicians drank a glass of sherry to the success of fees in general and their own in particular.

"And now, what about our fair patient beneath this roof?" said Doctor Copperas.

"Oh, ah," observed Thurston, "I almost forgot what we were here for. But did you notice the strange things she has uttered in her ravings, accusing herself of having conspired with the prince regent to send her own husband to the scaffold, and having caused the death of Sir Archibald Malvern by having him suffocated in a bath?"

"Yes, but all this was not the worst," remarked Doctor Copperas. "She talked of having been ravished by the public executioner."

"I remember," rejoined Thurston. "What did you think of all that?"

"Humph!" observed Copperas, "I hardly know what to say. We are well aware that strange truths do peep forth in these ravings, and we likewise know that ladies of quality do queer things. There is doubtless some foundation for her self-accusings. For my part, I think it is clear enough she has been intimate with the prince regent. His name is ever uppermost in her mind. But as for the ravishing affair, that seems so utterly inconsistent, so very improbable —"

"Oh, of course!" interrupted Thurston. "But do you not think it would be as well to let the marquis understand that we consider his niece's honour to be entirely in our keeping? It might influence the amount of fees, you know, friend Copperas."

"So it might, friend Thurston," was the response. "Now, then, let us ring for the marquis."

Thereupon the two physicians rose from the table, rang the bell, and then retreated together to one of the window recesses, where they stood holding each other by the button-hole, assuming the most serious air, and looking, for all the world, as if they had merely just taken some hurried refreshment and had been the greater part of the time in earnest and profound consultation together.

A servant entered, and one of them told him, in a grave voice, to request the presence of the marquis. The domestic retired, and soon afterward Lord Leveson made his appearance. But the two doctors affected to be so deeply engaged in their consultation as not to observe his entrance, while they went on talking in the most serious manner possible, shaking their heads, and mingling such a host of technical terms with their discourse as to render it unintelligible as the Cherokee language itself to the bewildered marquis.

"Ah! here is his lordship," said Doctor Copperas, now pretending to observe the nobleman.

"Well, gentlemen," said Lord Leveson, "what tidings have you for me?"

Both the doctors shook their heads, and Thurston proceeded to say, "My dear marquis, can you put confidence in the nurse and the maid who are in attendance upon Lady Ernestina?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired the nobleman, his countenance expressive of alarm and anxiety.

"Because, my dear marquis," continued Doctor Thurston, "if there be one eminent member of the faculty who more than another has devoted himself to the study of delirium in all its phases, and who therefore is experienced in judging how far the ravings of the invalid are founded upon truth, that one is Doctor Copperas."

"I cannot consent to receive a compliment," said the amiable gentleman thus referred to, "at the expense of

your own experiences, Doctor Thurston, in febrile maladies and the delirium accompanying them."

"Well, well, gentlemen," interrupted the marquis, somewhat impatiently, "tell me what you mean. Is it that you apprehend that my niece may betray some secret matters which in her rational moments she would fain conceal?"

"To speak the truth candidly," answered Doctor Thurston, "that is precisely what we do mean. Therefore we earnestly recommend your lordship to secure the silence of the nurse and the lady's-maid. Money will do wonders in putting a seal upon the lips, will it not, Doctor Copperas?"

"It will, Doctor Thurston," replied the learned physician, with a courteous bow, for these two eminent men invariably made it a rule never to appear too intimate with each other in the presence of a third party.

"Oh, as for that," said the marquis, scarcely able to conceal his vexation, "I can answer for the lady's-maid; she is fidelity and prudence personified. As for the nurse, I will line her pockets with gold. Of course the honour of your profession will induce you, gentlemen, to keep to yourselves whatever you may have heard fall from my niece's lips in her delirium?"

"Oh, as a matter of course, my dear marquis," said Doctor Thurston.

"Beyond all doubt," added Doctor Copperas.

Lord Leveson stepped aside to one of the windows for a moment, took out a bundle of bank-notes from his pocket, selected two of a hundred pounds each, and presenting one to Doctor Thurston and the other to Doctor Copperas, he observed, in a significant manner, "I rely upon your secrecy."

They renewed the assurance of strict honour in the matter, and then proceeded to inform his lordship that, after a long, serious, and mature deliberation, they had come to the conclusion that Lady Ernestina Dysart was in a state of the utmost danger, that nothing but their unwearied attention could assist the patient in wrestling against her malady, and that they would therefore do themselves the pleasure of calling three times a day, unless sent for oftener.

When they had taken their departure, after having left a prescription, the Marquis of Leveson proceeded to the in-

valid's chamber. Lady Ernestina was now asleep, but the marquis sat down by her bedside, watching for her to awake. The nurse and lady's-maid were both in the room, the former dozing in a great armchair, the latter treading about on tiptoe, putting things to rights. Several bottles of medicine were upon the mantel, and there was every indication about the apartment to show that Ernestina was really very ill.

The marquis, sitting himself down by the bedside, gazed upon her long and mournfully. She was frightfully altered. But a few days had elapsed since, through the fearful outrages of the Hangman, she had been stretched upon that sick-bed, and yet it seemed as if the ravages of years had wreaked upon her their searing, scathing, blighting ills. The natural plumpness of her flesh had yielded to haggardness of the countenance and emaciation of the person. Her cheeks were sunken and ghastly, her eyes were surrounded by a deep blue tint, her nose was thin and pointed, her lips were well-nigh colourless, the splendour of the bust was disappearing rapidly. And all this was the work of a few short days.

The very room seemed to be filled with the atmosphere of death, and as the marquis sat contemplating the wreck which his niece had become, and thought of the ruin, too, which she must remain, even if she recovered from this dangerous illness, certain compunctious feelings crept into his heart. For here we must observe that, having in the first instance learned from her ravings enough to make him suspect the nature of the outrage which she had received at the hands of the Hangman, he had subsequently questioned her, when alone with her, and in one of her lucid intervals, relative to the fearful secret which seemed to weigh upon her mind. Then was it that in the bitterest agonies of mingled grief and horror and self-loathing she had confessed all to him.

Now, therefore, as he sat gazing upon her, he thought that if after her husband's death upon the scaffold he had removed her to one of his country-seats, and there remained to watch over her and save her from pursuing the career of profligacy on which she had then already entered, he might have averted all these evils beneath the weight of which she was now succumbing. But instead of doing that he had allowed her to remain at Leveson House, within those walls which contained the apartments filled with pictorial

and sculptured obscenities; and he had likewise encouraged her, as it were, in her own depravities, by making her his accomplice in his attempt to deprive Louisa Stanley of her innocence. As he now beheld her stretched before him with faded beauties and ruined charms, a ghastly wreck in the vigor of youthfulness, the mere shadow of the splendid being that she so lately was, his heart smote him bitterly, bitterly, and he thought that in all this he recognized the evidence of a superhuman retribution.

Now he wished to speak seriously with his niece, but she still slept on. For a time the fever had left her. There was not even a trace of its tint upon her cheeks, but all was wan and ghastly there. Two hours elapsed, and still she awoke not. The marquis's dinner-hour arrived, and he descended to the parlour where the repast was served, leaving instructions that he was to be summoned to the sick-chamber so soon as the invalid should awake.

It was not until nine o'clock in the evening that Ernestina opened her eyes. The fever had entirely left her, but she was weak almost to powerlessness. The medicine which had been prescribed was given her, and the nurse then sent to fetch the marquis. When he came he desired to be left alone with the invalid. The lady's-maid and the nurse accordingly quitted the room, and placing himself by the side of the couch, he took his niece's hand, saying, "My poor Ernestina, you have been very ill, you are yet very ill."

"Yes," she answered, in a low, plaintive voice, "I feel as if the hand of death were upon me."

"Do not speak thus despondingly, my dear niece," said Lord Leveson. "I have come on the present occasion on purpose to see if there be anything I can do to ease your mind of whatever annoyances may be pressing upon it. I have sent the nurse and maid away from the room, in order that you may speak without reservation."

"Ah! my dear uncle," exclaimed Ernestina, her voice suddenly swelling with a degree of excitement, "you then entertain the fear that this is my death-bed? Yes, I see by your look that such is the case. Perhaps the physicians have told you so? And, ah!" she continued, without waiting for his reply, "I also apprehend the worst. Would to God that I were prepared for it! I have had my omens, my warnings, ay, fearful warnings. Have I not been delirious?

Have I not raved? Yes, I remember that it was in those ravings I revealed the terrible secret which made you question me the other day. Oh, what must be thought by those who have overheard me!"

"Compose yourself, my dear Ernestina," said the marquis. Then, hesitating not at a falsehood in order to tranquillize her, he added, "Those who have been present at your bedside when the delirium of fever was upon you attach no significancy to anything you may have said. In such a state of mind invalids give utterance to the wildest and the most improbable as well as the most monstrous things."

"Monstrous indeed!" said Ernestina, shuddering visibly. "But unhappily all the monstrosities to which I may have given utterance were based on truth, terrible, terrible truth. Just now I said that I had received omens and warnings, and I have so. In my dreams have I beheld frightful objects. I have seen my husband draw aside the curtain and gaze upon me, with the halter around his neck, and his features all distorted with the agonies of strangulation. Ah! and how frightfully did he glare upon me with his stony eyes! How fiendish, how diabolical was the look of malignant hate that grew upon those convulsed features! O my God! it was terrible, terrible!"

"Ernestina, you will excite yourself," exclaimed the marquis, "into delirium once more. Do, I beseech you, compose your feelings. Tranquillize yourself, give not way to these appalling ideas."

"But they force themselves upon my mind," answered Ernestina, bitterly. "And what I have told you was not all. Not merely have I seen my husband standing by the side of the couch, there, in the very spot where you are now seated, but I have likewise beheld the dreadful man — O God! I cannot name him — whose outrage has reduced me to what I am. Ah, the agonizing sense of that outrage will be my death. It was the most hideous of pollutions," and the wretched lady writhed convulsively in her couch.

"Ernestina, you must change the current of your ideas," said the marquis. "For Heaven's sake, let us talk of something else."

"Wait a moment," said his niece. "This thing is uppermost in my mind, and I must speak of it. Listen, then. It was one night, — I do not know which, for I have not

been able to keep any note of the lapse of time, — but I remember full well that I awoke, and looking around, beheld the nurse sleeping in her armchair. The tapers were alight on the mantel, and a solemn silence prevailed in the room, broken only by the regular breathing of the woman. I became wide awake, and was in as full possession of my intellects as I am at this moment. All of a sudden it seemed to me that I heard the door open; but I did not think anything of it, as I fancied it might be still early in the night and that the maid was coming in to see me ere retiring for good. But you may fancy the mortal terror that fastened itself upon me when I saw the figure of a man steal in on tiptoe, stop to assure himself that the nurse was sleeping, and then creep in the same stealthy manner up to the foot of the bed.

"I could not cry out; I was paralyzed with the stupor of consternation, for I had no difficulty in recognizing that monster in human shape who has caused me such indescribable misery. He saw my eyes fixed upon him, and as I gave not utterance to even the faintest sound, he doubtless comprehended how completely terror had stupefied my senses. Oh, if I were to live a thousand years, I should not forget the diabolical expression of gratified revenge which gradually expanded over his features, making them seem ten thousand times more hideous than they naturally are. His eyes appeared to gleam like those of a snake with a vibrating light that sent the chill of death to my heart's core. For upwards of a minute did he thus stand glaring upon me, and then, leaning far over from the foot of the bed, he whispered, with a sort of hissing sound, 'Am I not revenged? You would have left me to perish in that cursed chair; but, thanks to your uncle's amour with Lady Sackville, I escaped. And now it is you who perish. Yes, you are dying with shame, because you have been the Hangman's mistress. Well, you will go to join your husband, whom you sent through my hands to prepare your way. Don't think, however, that if you do live on, I shall leave you unmolested. No, in a night or two I shall come and see you again. I don't think, for your own sake, you will tell those about you that you expect such a visitor. So I have nothing to fear on that score. But you may perhaps fancy to-morrow, when you awake again, that this was a dream. Here is something to prove that it was

not.' And drawing out his great clasp-knife, he thrust it through the bed-curtain. Immediately afterward he took his departure, stealing out of the room as noiselessly as he had entered it, and I swooned away."

"Heavens! what is all this I hear?" exclaimed the marquis, who had listened with an awful interest to the narrative. "Dares the villain persecute you thus? But no, it can have been nought save a dream."

"No, my dear uncle," answered Lady Ernestina, "it is no dream. Behold!" and she pointed to one of the curtains at the foot of the four-post bedstead.

The marquis, springing from his seat, hastened to inspect the drapery, and there, sure enough, was the hole, or, rather, slit, about half an inch long, and evidently made by a sharp knife passed through the curtain. His countenance became very pale, his lips quivered with rage, and returning to his seat by the bedside, he said, "Yes, my dear niece, it is indeed but too evident that the miscreant has been here. Oh, what can I do to guard against further intrusions on his part? It is clear that the ruffian defies bolts and bars, and penetrates into any house which it suits his purpose to enter. Nevertheless I will see if I cannot stop him in future. Devising some excuse for the precaution, I will presently give orders that two of the men servants shall watch down-stairs all night, with loaded pistols, and I will charge them that they unhesitatingly and mercilessly shoot down any intruder."

"Yes, if you will do this, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, "you will relieve me of the cruelest apprehensions."

"But why, my dear child," asked Lord Leveson, "did you not tell me of all this before? I would have adopted the precautions I am now about to take."

"Oh, if you only knew with what bitter repugnance I allude to that monster," said Ernestina, "you would understand why I have not before confided to you the circumstance of his visit. On the present occasion, however, some feeling for which I cannot account has urged me to give you all these explanations, and likewise inspired me with the courage and power to do so. But ere now, my dear uncle, at the beginning of this conversation, you observed that if there were anything you could do to ease my mind it should be done. Alas, I know that I am dying, I feel that

I shall never quit this couch again, except to be laid in my coffin. There is therefore one request which I have to make — "

"Name it, Ernestina, name it," cried the marquis, "and if it be in my power to grant it, rest assured that it shall be cheerfully fulfilled."

"I could wish to see my brother Algernon before I die," said Ernestina. "Will you despatch messengers to fetch him hither, with the least possible delay?"

"You know, my dear Ernestina," replied the marquis, "that he is on the Continent. I told you some days ago all that he has been doing — "

"But if you despatch trusty envoys," interrupted the invalid, "with positive orders to travel night and day, can he not be brought back speedily? Oh, if you write but a few lines to inform him that his sister is dying, and that she implores him to come and see her, if only for a few instants, ere the hand of death shall close her eyes for ever, think you that he will not hasten to obey the summons? Yes, Algernon possesses a noble and a generous heart, and he will come, I feel persuaded that he will come. Grant me this request; it is the last, perhaps, I shall ever make, and you cannot conceive how great would be the relief to my soul to know that Algernon had been sent for."

"Not a moment's delay shall take place, my dear niece," replied her uncle, "ere the necessary measures are adopted," and thus speaking, he rang the bell.

The lady's-maid immediately answered the summons.

"Tell Brockman and John," said the marquis, "that they are to make instantaneous preparations to start off on a journey. A post-chaise and four must be ordered at once. And having delivered this message, bring me writing materials." Then, as soon as the maid had quitted the room, he turned again toward Ernestina, saying, "I will send two of my domestics, so that when they reach France, one may take one route and one another, in case Algernon should be returning home, and thus there will be little chance of missing him. I will write two letters also, that each may be the bearer of one."

In a few minutes the maid reappeared with the writing materials, and the Marquis of Leveson, sitting down at the table, penned the following letter:

"ALGERNON: — Your sister Ernestina is very, very ill, and she conjures you to lose not a moment in coming straight to Albemarle Street to see her. Whatever occupations you may have in hand must be immediately abandoned, nor must you pause on the road for any purpose whatsoever. Travel day and night, I beseech you, or you may not behold Ernestina alive.

"Your uncle,

"LEVESON.

"To the Lord Algernon Cavendish."

The marquis made a duplicate copy of this letter, and having sealed them both, directed them, not with the name of Lord Algernon Cavendish, but by the assumed one which his nephew had taken. By the time the despatches were thus prepared, the lady's-maid returned again with the intimation that Brockman and John were in readiness, and the marquis descended to the hall to give them the requisite instructions and also the funds for their journey. The post-chaise and four was in waiting, and soon after ten o'clock did the messengers take their departure.

Lord Leveson now ascended once more to his niece's chamber, whither the nurse had returned during his temporary absence; but again he dismissed both this woman and the maid for a little while, telling them he would sit for another half-hour with Lady Ernestina. Accordingly, when again alone with his niece, he said all he could think of to tranquillize her mind and cheer her spirits. Thus did the half-hour elapse, and he was about to bid her good night and summon her attendants, when the door was gently opened, and as the nobleman looked to see who was entering, he gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of mingled rage and horror on beholding the hideous countenance of the Hangman.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CATASTROPHE

That ejaculation was immediately comprehended by Lady Ernestina Dysart, and suddenly starting up into a sitting posture in the couch, she gazed with wild, staring eyes upon the advancing form of her deadliest enemy. Then slowly sinking back on the pillow, she groaned in agony of spirit.

"Monster! what do you here?" demanded Lord Leveson, confronting the public executioner, who had not at first observed the nobleman in the shade of the curtain.

"Ah! is it your lordship?" said Daniel Coffin, coolly. "You and me are old friends."

"Friends!" echoed the marquis, becoming purple with indignation, "how dare you address me in such terms? But this is not the place for dispute. Come with me."

"Not till I have said a word to her ladyship," responded the Hangman, with brutal gruffness.

"Do, for Heaven's sake, I implore you, come," said the marquis. "You know that I hesitate not to pay liberally. Come, I say."

"Well, that's an inducement, at all events," observed Coffin. "Lead the way. But one word," he added, clutching the marquis forcibly with his rough, grimy hand, "don't think of making any exposure or kicking up a row, for if you do, I on my part will let out such things as shall make the whole world ring."

"Enough, spare your threats," interrupted the marquis, in a strange, deep tone. "Whatever takes place between us shall be strictly quiet and secret. Come."

Then hastening to open the door, Lord Leveson looked out into the passage, to assure himself that the coast was

clear, and finding that it was so, he led the way to the Crimson Drawing-room, where he knew lights to be burning.

"Will you remain here for a few moments," he asked, "while I go and send the attendants up to my niece? They will not return to her until they hear the bell ring, or else receive orders to the same effect."

"And what guarantee have I," demanded the Hangman, "that you won't come back to me with two or three constables at your heels?"

"The same guarantee which prevents me from ringing the bell now and summoning assistance," and as the marquis thus spoke, he looked firmly in the Hangman's face.

"True," said Daniel Coffin. "And besides, you dare not provoke exposure, for a variety of reasons. Go, then, but be not long absent. One moment, however," he added, as a thought struck him. "What if any of your tall flunkys should happen to come in here during your absence? They might think it rather odd to find a genelman like me in the place, and not believing my word that you and I are old friends and have got private business together, they might unceremoniously drag me out into the street and lug me off to the watch-house. Now, this is a chance I should like to avoid."

"Well," said the marquis, after a few moments' consideration, "take one of the candles and step in here. You have been there before," he added, with bitter irony, "and I need scarcely assure you that my domestics are not in the habit of intruding into that part of the house."

Thus speaking, the marquis unlocked the door leading into the suite of private apartments, and Daniel Coffin, taking up one of the wax lights, proceeded into the adjacent room. Lord Leveson closed the door upon him, and as he did so a sudden expression of malignant triumph appeared upon the nobleman's features, as he muttered between his false teeth, "Nothing could be better. It aids the execution of the resolve which I have adopted."

He then quitted the Crimson Drawing-room and hastened to send the nurse up to his niece. Having done this, he sped to his own bedchamber, and taking from a cupboard a case of pistols, ascertained that they were loaded. As he put in fresh priming, he said to himself, "All this must have an end. It is impossible to tolerate the persecutions of that monster

any longer. His extortions and intrusions are beyond all bearing, and the oftener I yield, the greater will his exactions become. I will shoot him like any dog. The circumstance that he has stolen into my house, unperceived by any one, will be corroborated by the servants, and the explanation of the tragedy will, therefore, be easy enough. What is it, after all? I find a robber on the premises, and I shoot him. No one will think of inquiring how I came to have pistols so handy, and if the question be asked, an excuse is easily devised. Oh, wretch, wretch! your hour is now come, and I will avenge my dying niece. But I must lose no time."

While these reflections passed hurriedly through Lord Leveson's brain, he concealed the pistols, which were small and of elegant workmanship, about his person, and retraced his way to the Crimson Drawing-room. Thence he proceeded into the adjacent apartment, where the Hangman was lounging negligently upon one of the splendid sofas, with his dusty boots on the velvet cushion.

"Now," said the nobleman, "what do you require? What do you demand of me?" and as he thus spoke, he placed himself in such a position as to be near enough to take sure aim of the Hangman without affording him the chance of springing up and dashing the pistol out of his hand the moment it should be drawn forth.

"I suppose your lordship knows," responded Coffin, raising himself to a sitting posture, "that I entertain a dreadful vengeance against your niece, Lady Ernestina, for I dare say she has told you everything?"

"Yes, everything," replied the marquis, his countenance ashy pale, but still with an expression of desperate firmness. "The atrocious outrage you committed upon her —"

"Outrage, indeed!" echoed the Hangman, contemptuously, as well as with ferocity in his looks; "but do you know, my lord, the different outrages this precious niece of yours has attempted against me, first plotting to stick a dagger into me at Westminster Bridge, then thrusting me into one of your queer chairs with the intention of leaving me to die of starvation?"

"Wretch!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, and drawing forth one of the pistols with marvellous rapidity, he at once levelled it point-blank at the Hangman's head.

But it flashed in the pan, and quick as the eye could wink, or like a tiger darting upon its prey, Daniel Coffin sprang with a ferocious growl at the marquis, hurled him upon the carpet, put one hand over his mouth to prevent him from crying out, and with the other tore from his person the second pistol with which the nobleman was provided.

"You accursed old scoundrel!" said the Hangman, in a terrible voice, "what's to prevent me from blowing out your brains? But no," he immediately ejaculated, as a thought struck him, and his eyes flashed with malignant fires. "I will punish you in another way. Come, get up. But, by Satan! if you dare to cry out or approach the bell-ropes, I'll shoot you through the head with your own weapon."

The public executioner made the wretched marquis rise from the floor, and seizing him by the collar of his coat, he pushed him into the next room. There he hurled him at once and with terrible violence into the nearest mechanical chair. The sharp click was heard, the machinery performed its work, and the Marquis of Leveson was in a moment a captive in one of the engines which had so often favoured his lustful designs against virgin innocence.

For nearly a minute the nobleman was so overcome by terror, consternation, and dismay that he could not give utterance to a word. All that had just passed so hurriedly seemed to be a phase in a hideous dream, but as his ideas began to collect themselves, he raised his looks in a beseeching manner toward Daniel Coffin. There was little light in the room, for the candle had been left burning in the adjacent one, and its beams shed but a faint lustre through the open doorway. In that uncertain light the Hangman's features appeared horrible indeed, with the expression of devilish malignity and glowering triumph that was upon them; so that when the unhappy marquis raised his eyes to that repulsive countenance, he beheld nought encouraging in the looks which met his own. Nevertheless, so utterly desperate was his position that he was ready to catch at any straw of hope, and in a supplicating voice he said, "Coffin, you indeed have reason to be angry with me, but let us come to terms."

"Terms, indeed!" echoed the Hangman, with a savage growl. "What terms can I come to with a treacherous old villain like you? It would be a pity, however, to leave anything valuable about your person."

Thus speaking, the ruffian proceeded to rifle the pockets of the miserable marquis of all they contained. He took from the nobleman his watch and chain, the diamond pin from his shirt-frill, the rings from his fingers, his purse and a roll of bank-notes from his pocket.

"A thousand guineas if you let me go," said the marquis, awfully terrified.

"No, not if you offered me ten thousand, or twenty thousand," replied the Hangman, "because I should know very well that you have only got some cursed treachery in view."

"On my soul and honour, as a noble and as a gentleman, I will keep faith with you," urged the marquis, imploringly.

"I can't believe it," rejoined Daniel Coffin, with brutal gruffness. "Things have gone too far betwixt you and me for us to have any more faith in each other. In fact, you must have been very desperate, and felt that matters had come to a crisis, when you made up your mind to shoot me. But let me tell you, my lord, that my vengeance is not half-finished yet. I mean to make the house too hot to hold you," added the villain, with a savage leer of fearful significancy.

He then turned abruptly away, fetched the wax candle from the adjoining room, and as he held it in his hand, stopped in front of the now horror-stricken marquis, saying, in a terrible voice, "I mean by one bold stroke to put an end to you and your vile niece at once. By so doing I shall punish you both for all you have tried to do against me, and I shall at the same time relieve myself from any chance of being troubled by you in future. I know pretty well that if you noblemen make up your minds to ruin a poor devil like me, you won't hesitate at the means, and, as I just now said, your lordship evidently feels that things have come to such a crisis that, no matter at what risk to yourself, you must get rid of me. So here goes!"

With these words the Hangman, who had lashed himself up like any maddened tiger to a frenzy of rage, hurried on into the gallery containing all the specimens of art which the prurient imagination of Lord Leveson had at different times congregated there. The nobleman, fearfully alive to the full meaning of the miscreant's threats, called after him, in an agonizing voice of the most piteous entreaty, to relent, to come back, and to enter into amicable terms with him.

But Daniel Coffin was deaf to all appeals, and rushing on into the gallery, he set fire to the draperies in every part.

Then, speeding back again, and heedless of the cries of the miserable marquis, he traversed the suite of apartments, locked the door leading into the Crimson Drawing-room, issued thence, ascended the stairs without meeting a soul, gained the attics, and passed forth to the roof of the house. Reaching the empty dwelling a little higher up the street, he descended the dark and deserted stairs of that house, and let himself out through the area. Hurrying on to that extremity of the street which was farthest from Piccadilly, he there halted to observe the result of his atrocious proceeding. Nor did he wait long. In a very few minutes cries of " Fire " met his ears, a lurid light sprang up above Leveson House, and almost immediately afterward the flames were seen gushing forth from the roof.

The Hangman, not choosing to be observed loitering about near the scene of his crime and his venegance, hurried away, chuckling horribly to himself and gloating over the deed which he had accomplished.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon of the following day when a post-chaise and four, on its way to London, dashed up to the door of the Green Man tavern at Blackheath, to change horses.

There was one person inside, a young gentleman of exceedingly handsome countenance, slender figure, and elegant appearance, and two domestics rode upon the box behind. One of these servants, who seemed the superior of the two, and was in plain clothes, the other being in livery, leaped down the moment the chaise stopped, and urged the hostlers to use all possible despatch in changing the horses.

" You seem to be in a hurry? " said the landlord, who had come out to superintend the process, and perhaps with a hope that the traveller might need some refreshment.

" Yes," answered the domestic. " It is Lord Algernon Cavendish who is hastening to town to see his sister, Lady Ernestina Dysart, who is dying."

" Surely, then," said the landlord, " they belong to the Leveson family, don't they? "

Brockman, for he it was, answered in the affirmative.

" Perhaps, then, you don't know what has happened? "

said the landlord, with the air of a man who had some disagreeable tidings to impart.

"Know what?" demanded Brockman, in amazement.

"I am sorry to say," was the rejoinder, "that I have got very bad news to tell."

"Bad news? Speak, what do you mean?"

"I mean, unfortunately, that Leveson House was burned down last night."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Brockman. "But were any lives lost?"

"It is feared so," answered the landlord. "But I heard no particulars. There are a few lines in this morning's paper about it, but very little, indeed, and no details. The guard of one of the London and Dover coaches told me this morning, as he passed on his way down, that there was a rumour up at the West End that the marquis himself, a lady, and two or three of the servants had been burned to death, but he wasn't sure."

Brockman waited to hear no more, even if the landlord had anything further to say, but hastening up to the carriage window, the valet communicated to Lord Algernon Cavendish the intelligence he had just received.

"Oh, my poor sister!" exclaimed the young nobleman, clasping his hands in despair. "For God's sake, tell the hostlers to make haste. Lavish gold, Brockman, upon the postilions. Suspense is intolerable."

"All ready!" at this moment exclaimed the landlord.

Brockman hastened to give some instructions to the postilions, promising them liberal rewards if they sped like the wind, and then having mounted to his seat upon the box, he exclaimed, "All right!" and away dashed the equipage toward the metropolis.

It would be difficult to describe the agonies of suspense which Lord Algernon Cavendish experienced during the three-quarters of an hour which elapsed until the vehicle reached the corner of Albemarle Street. But in the meantime we will avail ourselves of the opportunity to state incidentally that Brockman and John, while waiting on the pier at Dover for the sailing of the vessel which they had hired to convey them across to France, were agreeably surprised on beholding Lord Algernon Cavendish land from a sailing-packet that arrived at the time from Calais. On

hearing the object of their mission and receiving his uncle's notes, which they put into his hands, he, as a matter of course, had at once agreed to accompany them post-haste to London; but while stopping for a few minutes at Canterbury to change horses, he had seized the opportunity to pen a few brief lines to some one in the neighbourhood. This note he gave to one of the hotel servants, together with a liberal fee, so that it might be conveyed at once to the place of its address; and then, the chaise being ready to start again, he had at once pursued his hurried journey. But alas! we have just seen what sad tidings awaited him at Blackheath, and now they were to be fearfully realized when the post-chaise entered Albemarle Street.

Leveson House had ceased to exist. Nought but a blackened ruin remained, the scathed and blasted skeleton of former pomp, magnificence, and grandeur. A crowd was collected in front of the burned edifice, for the awful catastrophe had throughout the day attracted hundreds of persons at different times to the spot. Leaping forth from the vehicle, Algernon at once received from the nearest bystanders a terrible confirmation of the rumours that had reached him at Blackheath relative to the fate of his uncle, his sister, and some of the servants.

It appeared that so terrible was the conflagration that it burst forth all in a moment, as if the house had been fired in several parts. All was in an instant confusion and dismay. Some of the domestics had rushed out into the street, without pausing to care for any others of the inmates, but some had hastened up-stairs to rescue Lady Ernestina. The flames, however, forced them back, for the house, having an immense quantity of woodwork about it, burned like tinder. All endeavours, therefore, to save Lady Ernestina Dysart were in vain, and equally futile was the hurried search made for the marquis himself. But suddenly, as Lord Algernon's informant went on to relate, a large portion of the building gave way, and much of the interior was for a few brief instants exposed to the view of the crowd gathered in the street. Then was it that, to the horror of all the spectators, the Marquis of Leveson was seen writhing in a chair to which he appeared to be held fast by some unaccountable means. At all events, sure enough was it that the wretched nobleman was thus observed for that brief

interval of a few instants struggling and battling with convulsive desperation in the armchair whence it was but too evident he could not extricate himself. The flames were pouring like a torrent around him. In another instant he was utterly enveloped therein, and his appalling cries reached the ears of the horror-stricken spectators. Then another portion of the building gave way, a huge column of fire shot up as if a volcano had suddenly burst forth beneath the very foundations of the mansion, and no more was seen or heard of the wretched marquis. Finally, it appeared that when a muster subsequently took place of all who had succeeded in escaping from the conflagration, Lord Leveson, Lady Ernestina, the nurse, the lady's-maid, and the old housekeeper were missing. The fire had continued to burn for some hours afterward, and now, amidst the charred and blackened remains, it was impossible to discover the slightest trace of those human beings who had fallen victims to its fury.

The origin of the conflagration appeared to be enveloped in the deepest mystery. It was impossible to account for so sudden and furious an outburst of the desolating element, and the utter ruin which had been caused prevented the possibility of discovering the source of the disaster. The prevailing opinion, however, was that it had arisen from an accident; and in his den in Fleet Lane did the Hangman still gloat over the idea of the vengeance he had consummated and the wreck he had caused.

Lord Algernon Cavendish, who by this catastrophe had become Marquis of Leveson and the sudden possessor of enormous wealth, was overpowered with grief at the terrific fate of his sister.

Oh, to have been in time to see her ere she thus perished miserably, to have learned from her lips that she was penitent for the past, and that she deplored the errors into which her strong passions had led her, this would have been a solace to the generous-hearted young nobleman. Little recked he for the nobler title, the more exalted rank, and the vastly superior riches which he thus inherited. His soul was stricken with grief to think that his uncle and his sister should have died in so shocking a manner.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOUISA'S . LOVER

Several days had elapsed since the occurrences took place at Canterbury which have been recorded in previous chapters, and Lady Sackville was still an inmate of the cottage. She had received letters alike from her husband and her half-brother Valentine; she had also received answers to the epistles she had addressed to Miss Bathurst and the prince regent. As least important, we will speak of the latter ones first.

Miss Bathurst had written kindly, but still in the strain of a thorough woman of the world. She expressed herself perfectly satisfied with the manner in which Lady Sackville had fulfilled the terms of her agreement in all respects. She admitted that neither she nor Mrs. Fitzherbert had any further request to make at the hands of royalty, and therefore they required not Lady Sackville's services any more. Accordingly, so far as Miss Bathurst was concerned personally, she had no objection to offer to Venetia's retirement from the court circle; but she bade her " dear young friend," as she called her, reflect maturely ere she voluntarily gave up a position which, once abdicated, could never be regained. Venetia — for Clara Stanley still preserved this Christian name, it being the one which figured in the peerage, and which she therefore could not give up — was in no way moved from her settled purpose by Miss Bathurst's reasoning, and Louisa, to whom she showed the letter, was overjoyed to find her sister so resolute in the step which was for ever to remove her from the sphere of temptations.

The prince regent's letter was full of mingled entreaties and reproaches. He was, after his own fashion, much attached to Venetia, but his love, if such it may be termed,

was entirely of a sensual character. Although during his connection with her he had indulged in other intrigues, as, for instance, with Penelope Arbuthnot, Lady Ernestina, and Mrs. Malpas, yet he was very far from being sated with Venetia's charms; and, moreover, all prince though he were, he was not a little proud of possessing as a mistress the most splendid creature that ever had appeared at the English court, — perhaps, indeed, the handsomest woman that England had ever produced. He therefore wrote in an impassioned style to Venetia, imploring her to return, reminding her of all the benefits he had showered upon herself, her husband, and the numerous persons for whom at any time she had solicited his favours, and promising to bestow a dukedom upon Horace, so that she might become a duchess, if she would retrace her steps to Carlton House. He even declared that if she refused he should be inclined to come after her, in defiance of public opinion, and he enjoined her, in any case, to answer his letter by return of post. Venetia did answer it, but only to reiterate her former resolution. She renewed the expressions of her gratitude for the royal bounties which herself, her husband, and her friends had received, but she emphatically declared that not only was her own happiness, but likewise that of others who were very dear to her, dependent on the resolve she had taken. She besought his Royal Highness not to commit any folly by coming after her, as such a step could only lead to a painful scene, without any beneficial result. This letter she likewise showed to Louisa, and the charming girl was still more rejoiced by that additional proof of her sister's fixity of purpose.

Sir Valentine Malvern stated in his letter that in a very long interview with Lord Sackville he had represented everything that Venetia wished him to say to her husband, and that Horace had stated but few scruples and raised but very slight objections in respect to the abandonment of a court life. Sir Valentine sincerely congratulated his half-sister upon the satisfactory result of that interview, and concluded by stating that when married to Florence Eaton he would pay both his half-sisters a visit, wherever they might be at the time, in company with his bride.

The letter of Horace Sackville was just what Venetia had expected. Her husband commenced by declaring how re-

joiced he was to find a marriage relation in so excellent, amiable, and generous-hearted a young man as Valentine Malvern. He went on to say that he could without much regret abandon his high position at court, and devote himself thenceforth to the cultivation of domestic bliss in the society of Venetia. He declared that, for his part, he would strive to his utmost to fling a veil over all that was past, so that no unpleasant memories should interfere to mar their future happiness. He emphatically promised that never would he make Venetia's bygone frailties a subject of reproach to her, inasmuch as he himself was a willing accomplice in what had occurred, and had profited thereby. He dwelt at considerable length upon those scenes of tenderness, contrition, and remorse which had episodically marked their career of brilliant dissipation, and to which Venetia herself had touchingly alluded in her letters. He said even at the time when those scenes occurred he had experienced a sort of presentiment that they were harbingers of future reformation, and he instanced them as proofs that however warped the good principles of the heart might become by external influences and surrounding circumstances, yet that no heart could be wholly lost when it was accessible to the better feelings of human nature. In a postscript he added that Valentine Malvern had behaved toward him with the utmost liberality, having advanced him twenty thousand pounds to settle all his liabilities and enable him to quit his post with honour and credit to himself; and he concluded by observing that so soon as these debts were liquidated and the business of his department as lord steward of the prince regent's household could be properly wound up, which would be in the course of a few days, he would repair to Canterbury to rejoin his wife and to be presented to her sister and aunt.

Altogether Lord Sackville's letter was one that gave sincere pleasure to Venetia, and likewise to the gentle Louisa, making the latter think much better of her noble brother-in-law than even Venetia's representations had previously done. Nor less was Miss Stanley herself well pleased with the correspondence of Lord Sackville and Sir Valentine Malvern, and most affectionately did she embrace her elder niece when she found her so determined in rejecting the advice of Miss Bathurst and remaining firm against the entreaties of the prince regent.

It was in the middle of the day following that on which these letters were received that a note, addressed to Louisa, was delivered at the cottage. She instantaneously recognized the handwriting of her lover, and, with fluttering heart, tore it open. Its contents were these:

"FOUNTAIN HOTEL, CANTERBURY, One o'clock.

"I have but a moment, my ever beloved Louisa, to inform you that I am arrived safe from the Continent. Oh, you cannot imagine, my angel, with what affliction it is that I am compelled to pass through Canterbury without being able even to speed to your home and fold you in my arms. But urgent matters compel me to hasten on, without delay, to London. When you learn the cause you will not reproach me.

"I know that you have too much confidence in my love and affection to fancy for an instant that aught save the most imperious circumstances could prevent me from coming first to you, on my arrival in England after this long, long absence. But in two or three days you will be certain to see me, and then, my ever loved Louisa, we shall meet to part no more. Then also will I give you explanations relative to many things which for certain reasons I have hitherto kept concealed from you.

"Your ever affectionate and devoted

"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

The young maiden wept as she perused this note, but they were tears of joy which trickled down her lovely cheeks. For Jocelyn was come back, he had arrived safe in England at last, and her love was of too holy and too confiding a character to permit her for an instant to imagine that he had devised any false pretext for not coming at once to see her. In a few days he would be there, and oh, then what happiness would await her!

Miss Stanley and Venetia sincerely congratulated Louisa upon Jocelyn's return, and when they read that part of the note which alluded to certain explanations which he meant to give her, they exchanged a quick smile of intelligence, for Venetia had privately confided to her aunt who Jocelyn Loftus really was, and that worthy relative was full well convinced of the unimpeachable integrity, the high character,

and the chivalrous nature of him who was shortly to wed the beauteous Louisa.

On the second morning after the receipt of this letter another one came from Jocelyn. It was a mourning one, with deep black edges, and with a black seal, but this seal was stamped with aristocratic armorial bearings, surmounted by a peer's coronet. Its contents ran as follows:

"I write a few lines, my dearest Louisa, to say that you may expect me to-morrow. You will perceive by my mourning letter that I have experienced a severe family loss. Such is indeed the case, and this may partially explain to you the circumstances which compelled me in such a hurried manner to pass through Canterbury and repair to London on my arrival in England. I have called at Carlton House, have seen Lord Sackville, and have learned from him that you know all relative to your sister, and that she is now with you. Oh, tell her, dearest Louisa, that it was with the most unfeigned rejoicing I heard from her husband's lips her resolve to abandon a court life, and equally pleased am I to hear that Lord Sackville himself is firm in the same intention. He and I have shaken hands as men whom marriage will soon place in the light of brothers, and you must tell your sister that she also is to welcome me as a brother when I come to-morrow. Nor less has it been with the purest delight that I have heard of the happy restoration of your excellent aunt to a comparatively perfect state of health. Present my sincerest regards to her.

"I learn from Lord Sackville that your sister has not as yet revealed to you the secret who I am, but that she has left all explanations on that head to be given by me. Be it so. Present circumstances — circumstances which have indeed greatly changed by the deaths that have plunged me into mourning — have induced me to resume my legitimate standing in society, and this much I will tell you now, dearest Louisa, that the only joy I experience in the possession of rank and wealth is because I can make you, beloved girl, the sharer of both. But all this will be revealed to-morrow.

"I shall leave London at such an hour so as to be in Canterbury at three o'clock punctually. At that hour I shall alight at the Fountain Hotel. Perhaps, if you and your

sister should be inclined for a walk about that time, you might meet me there, as you may be well assured that I shall count every moment as an intolerable delay until I once more fold you in my arms.

"For the last time, dearest Louisa, do I sign myself by the name of

"JOCELYN."

"He will be here to-day!" exclaimed the overjoyed Louisa, her angelic countenance radiant with delight, and oh, how truly beautiful did the amiable girl appear at this moment. But the next instant a shade of sadness passed over her countenance, and tears began to trickle down her cheeks as she murmured, with tremulous voice, "Poor Jocelyn! he has evidently lost those who were dear to him. He speaks of deaths in his family; it is therefore more than one who has died," and she wept for his sake.

But Venetia and Miss Stanley understood full well who they were that had thus died, although they were as yet utterly ignorant of the way of their deaths. But not only did that seal with the armorial bearings indicate who one was that had thus died, but knowing also who was the other nearest relative that Jocelyn had, they had no difficulty in conjecturing for whose loss he was the most deeply grieved. Louisa was too little acquainted with aristocratic usages and noble emblems to gather any clue of her lover's real rank from that heraldic seal, nor indeed was her gentle heart much moved by the prospect of wealth and rank to which he alluded in his letter. It was sufficient for her happiness that her lover was coming to meet her again that day, and that he wrote in a style which assured her of his constant affection. Nor will the reader blame her if, soon wiping away her tears, she abandoned herself to the delicious thoughts which it was natural she should experience at the certainty of beholding him in a few hours, and again did she receive the warmest congratulations from her aunt and sister.

It was an immense relief to the mind of Lady Sackville to learn that Louisa's lover was prepared to overlook all the past so far as she was concerned, and that with the natural generosity of his soul he had conveyed so delicate and soothing an intimation that their meeting would be of the most friendly and cordial nature. And now does the reader ask

whether, as three o'clock of that afternoon approached, there were any persons wending their way toward the Fountain Hotel, to be there in readiness to meet the expected one? Yes, the two sisters were threading the Dane John in that direction, and fain would Miss Stanley have accompanied them but that she feared to walk too far in her still enervated condition. But Lady Sackville and Louisa did repair to the hotel, and as her ladyship was already known there, her equipage and servants being all this while at that establishment, she and her sister were at once received with the utmost respect. They were conducted to a private sitting-room, and Lady Sackville whispered to one of her own domestics a few words stating for whom she and her sister were now waiting.

Half an hour passed, and soon after the clocks of the old cathedral and the numerous other churches of Canterbury had struck three, the sounds of an equipage dashing up the narrow street in which the Fountain Hotel is situated called forth all the dependents of the establishment. A splendid travelling-carriage, with armorial blazonry upon the panels, and drawn by four post-horses, whirled up to the hotel and passed in through the gateway.

The apartment in which Lady Sackville and Louisa were awaiting the expected one's coming commanded from its windows a view of the courtyard into which the equipage had rolled, and when they beheld him whom they expected alight, Louisa felt the faintness of excessive joy come over her.

"Compose yourself, my sweet sister," said Lady Sackville. "Oh, how delighted I am that this cup of happiness is so filled up to the brim for you."

Louisa could not give utterance to a word, but throwing herself into her sister's arms, she wept for joy on her bosom. And now hurried footsteps were heard approaching along the passage, and the next moment one of the hotel waiters threw open the door, and with officious importance, announced, in a loud tone, "The Marquis of Leveson."

A faint shriek escaped Louisa's lips as this name struck upon her ears, but the next instant she beheld the object of her best and purest affections, and springing toward each other, they were clasped in a fond embrace.

Again and again did the young marquis, for such indeed

was Jocelyn Loftus, strain the damsel to his heart, and she, weeping and smiling, glorious in her beauty and in her rapturous feelings as an April morning that is all sunshine and showers, gave back the fond caresses. Lady Sackville wept for joy at the sight, and if anything were now required to rivet the firmness of her resolve to trust only henceforth for happiness in sweet domestic bliss, it was the spectacle of the ineffable delight, so pure, so chaste, and holy, too, that was now experienced by this fond couple.

When the first full flood of joy had somewhat found its vent, the Marquis of Leveson turned toward Lady Sackville, and, taking her hand, he kissed her forehead, saying, " Dear sister, for such you will shortly become to me, I am truly delighted to meet you here."

" And never henceforth, Algernon," answered Lady Sackville, in a low and hurried voice, a voice that was tremulous, too, with profound emotion, " shall you have to blush to acknowledge me in any way as a friend or as a relative."

The young marquis pressed her hand in token that he received the assurance as an evidence of her contrition and her good faith, and that he put confidence in it. Then again turning toward his Louisa, he made her sit down by him on the sofa, and taking her hand, which he retained in his own, he said, " Beloved one, the officious zeal which the servant ere now manifested in announcing my name so suddenly — a little incident which in my haste to fold you in my arms I did not foresee, not, indeed, thinking that he had time to learn from my own domestics who I was — elicited an ejaculation of dismay from your lips. Yes, dearest Louisa, that name which he announced so abruptly is indeed the one which I now bear; and, as I declared in my letter, if there were ever a moment when I felt that I had reason to rejoice in that lofty rank which I possess, it is now, my angel, that I can ask you to become the sharer of it. I know full well that for a mind so pure, so ingenuous, and so artless as yours the splendours of rank have no dazzling brilliancy and the possession of illimitable wealth no factitious allurements; but still, constituted as society is, and considering the honour which the world shows to persons occupying an elevated position, it cannot be held as a misfortune that I am enabled to place a coronet upon this fair brow of thine, and to bear you away in due course to splendid mansions

situated in the midst of vast estates, and bid you regard them all as your own."

Louisa, still weeping and smiling, threw her arms about her lover's neck, and kissed him fondly in token of gratitude for the language which he thus held toward her. And, oh, whatever painful adventures the maiden might have passed through, whatever sorrowful reflections she might at any time have known, whatever misgivings for a season she might have entertained through the treachery of the late Marquis of Leveson in respect to her lover's fidelity, how immeasurable beyond compare was the recompense which she now received.

For a little space a shade of sadness was thrown over the scene, when the young marquis related the catastrophe which had deprived him of his sister Ernestina, that same catastrophe in which his uncle's life had also terminated so miserably. Forgotten then was any ill which for a time the generous-hearted Louisa had sustained at the hands of either the late marquis or of the perished Ernestina, and the tears ran down her cheeks as she listened to the sad tale which her lover recited.

But we will not dwell upon this, for it would be a ridiculous affectation to pretend that the late tragedy could materially mar the happiness which the lovers experienced at being thus reunited, — reunited, also, under circumstances so auspicious as to portend no more parting.

Let us follow the young Marquis of Leveson as, with Venetia on one arm and Louisa on the other, he repaired to that cottage where in times past he had first learned to esteem the amiable qualities of his intended bride, and in learning to esteem her had learned to love her. Let us suppose the cottage reached, and Miss Stanley appearing at the garden gate to give the most cordial welcome to the Marquis of Leveson; and then, while the happy party are sitting down to the dinner which Mary, the servant maid, had prepared in her very best style, and which the aunt in good sooth had specially superintended, let us devote the following chapter to certain explanations relative to him who throughout so large a portion of our narrative has figured as Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER XXV

THE YOUNG NOBLEMAN

Lord Algernon Cavendish (now the Marquis of Leveson) and Lady Ernestina Cavendish (afterward the wife of Mr. Dysart) were the only children of Lord Jocelyn Loftus Cavendish, younger brother of the late Marquis of Leveson who perished in the fire. Their parents had died early, leaving them but indifferently provided for. A country-seat in the north of England, and a small estate producing a bare six hundred a year, devoted to Algernon, while a few thousand pounds in the funds were the whole fortune of Ernestina. Algernon was educated at Eton, and subsequently passed three years at Cambridge, not with the view of entering the Church, but for the purpose of finishing his studies. There he acquitted himself well, and was known as a young man of excellent disposition, great steadiness of habits, and of the most upright principles. His sister Ernestina was placed at a fashionable boarding-school at Kensington. We have said, in one of the earlier chapters of this history, that from her childhood she was a special favourite with her uncle the Marquis of Leveson, who regularly sent for her from school every Saturday to pass the interval with him till the Monday morning. But what with the shallow kind of tutelage she experienced at the fashionable seminary and the utter unfitness of such a confirmed voluptuary as the marquis to be her guardian, the young lady was not reared in a manner at all calculated to settle her mind upon the foundation of sterling moral principle, or to curb those passions which she naturally possessed.

During a dangerous illness which the Marquis of Leveson experienced, Ernestina, grateful for his kindness toward her, nursed him with the utmost attention, and this circum-

stance riveted the attachment which the nobleman felt for his niece. On leaving school she became altogether an inmate of Leveson House, where her brother Algernon was likewise at the time passing a few weeks. But Algernon had not been accustomed to spend his holidays, when at Eton or the University, with his uncle. The young man, from the samples of the British aristocracy he met with at the public seminaries, had conceived no very great affection for the order to which he belonged, and having an uncle (by his late mother's side) dwelling in a distant county and entirely devoted to agricultural pursuits, Algernon had always preferred spending the vacations with him. This relative, however, died just before Algernon quitted Cambridge for good, and thus was it that he went to pass some little time at Leveson House. While there he could not help obtaining some insight into the real character of his uncle. Though himself of the steadiest habits, he was still experienced enough in the ways of the world — particularly after passing through the fiery ordeal of a college life — to perceive that his uncle was a confirmed voluptuary of the most unprincipled description, and a circumstance which soon after occurred made him look with loathing and horror upon his noble relative's character.

The incident we refer to was this. One day Algernon was reading in the Crimson Drawing-room, when he heard sounds resembling female shrieks that either appeared to be stifling, as if with a gag placed upon the lips, or else were penetrating through very thick walls which well-nigh deadened them. They continued, and the idea struck Algernon forcibly that they came from one of the inner rooms of the mansion. He had observed that the suite of apartments communicating from the Crimson Drawing-room were always shut up, but until this moment he had never paid much attention to the circumstance. Now, however, the mystery that was evidently connected with those rooms instantaneously associated itself in his mind with the screams which, though so faintly, were still reaching his ears. All the natural generosity and chivalrous enterprise of his nature were suddenly awakened by the thought that some female was enduring ill-treatment in those apartments. He flew to the door communicating therewith. By a most unusual oversight that door had been left unlocked. He opened it, and the screams,

emanating from an inner room, now sounded loud and piercing. Rushing onward, Algernon penetrated into the adjacent apartment, and there did an astounding spectacle meet his eyes. A lovely young creature, imprisoned in one of the mechanical chairs, was giving vent to her anguish, while the Marquis of Leveson, in the maddened fury of his excited passions, was literally stripping her garments off her. Her dress was all torn open, her bosom was bare, and the nobleman, regardless of her anguished shame, was gloating upon her charms previous to making himself the master of them. The unexpected presence of Algernon filled the intended victim with hope, but inspired the marquis with the rage of disappointment. He imperiously commanded Algernon to withdraw, covering him with reproaches for an intrusion which he attributed to the basest sentiment of curiosity. But the young man would not obey his incensed uncle, and taking up a shawl from the carpet, he threw it over the shoulders of the young female, insisting that she should be immediately released from the bondage of the chair. The marquis dared not refuse compliance with his nephew's demand. The girl was accordingly liberated, and a handsome sum of money was given by the unprincipled voluptuary to hush up the affair with her parents.

The reader may easily suppose that Algernon was not likely to remain another hour beneath his uncle's roof, and he insisted upon taking Ernestina away with him. The marquis, in tones of the most abject entreaty, besought Algernon not to expose him to the world, nor even hint at anything of a disparaging nature to his character in Ernestina's presence. Algernon readily promised compliance with these requests, — in the first place, because it was contrary to the natural generosity of his disposition to inflict an injury, and in the second place, because he was careful not to say anything that might shock the purity of his sister's mind. It was therefore agreed that Ernestina should be placed in the care of some distant female relatives, who resided a little way out of London, and for this proceeding some excuse was devised. Algernon, having seen his sister safe in her new home, set out upon a journey to the Highlands of Scotland, the sublime and striking scenery of which he had for some time been anxious to visit.

After an absence of about a year, Algernon returned to

London, expecting to find Ernestina still with her female relatives, from whose dwelling the letters he had received during the interval had been dated. But, to his surprise and annoyance, he found that since he last heard from her, a few weeks previous to his return, she had grown so weary of the monotonous and quiet life which her relations led that she had gone back of her own accord to Leveson House, where the marquis, who really entertained a great affection for her and had much missed her society, cheerfully received her. Whilst staying with those female relatives, she had fallen in with Mr. Dysart, who, though so much older than herself, had managed to win her affections. On her brother's return to London, finding that he much disapproved of her having gone back to Leveson House, and impatient of the control which she fancied he sought to exercise over her, she at once yielded to Mr. Dysart's solicitations and married him. The match was most unpalatable both to her uncle and her brother, and the former vowed that he never would speak to Paul Dysart, much less receive him inside his door, as long as he lived. Algernon, though likewise disapproving of the alliance, because he had a bad opinion of Dysart's character, nevertheless visited the newly married pair at their residence at Blackheath, but soon afterward he quitted London on a fresh excursion, and made a tour of Wales.

On his return to the capital, he repaired to Blackheath to visit his sister. Entering the grounds of the villa, he heard Ernestina's voice issuing from an arbour densely embowered in surrounding trees. Thinking that she was with her husband, he at once approached the spot, and, to his mingled astonishment and dismay, beheld her in the arms of an individual who was entirely unknown to him. This was Sir Archibald Malvern. Algernon, in his resentment, was about to inflict summary chastisement upon the seducer of his sister, but Ernestina, falling upon her knees, besought him to forbear from a proceeding that would inevitably create a disturbance and lead to exposure. The young nobleman accordingly subdued his angry feelings, but peremptorily ordered Sir Archibald to quit the premises at once. He then sat down with his sister, and in anguish of heart remonstrated with her upon her guilt, which it was impossible for her to deny. But now that the immediate

danger of exposure was removed, Ernestina resented what she termed " the supervision he ever continued to exercise over her conduct." Algernon was deeply afflicted to observe that Ernestina adopted such a course instead of displaying contrition, and he conjured her to reflect ere she prosecuted a career which would inevitably plunge her into disgrace sooner or later. But the more affectionate and conciliatory became her brother's manner, the more haughty and impatient was the spirit which she displayed, and they parted thus, with anger on her side and deep despondency on his own.

Then was it that the high-minded Algernon felt actually ashamed of the family to which he belonged, and blushed for the name he bore, a name which stamped him as a scion of this family which seemed resolved to disgrace itself. The train of thought into which he fell revived all the antipathies he had for some time experienced in respect to the aristocratic order to which he belonged, and he said to himself, " If ever I marry, it shall not be a daughter of the aristocracy. No, I will endeavour to find some maiden of innocence, virtue, and probity in a lowlier sphere, a maiden who, while possessing the attractions of her sex, shall be unacquainted with any of its vices." Thereupon he formed the resolution of abandoning, he cared not even if it were for ever, his lordly rank, and took his late father's Christian name and surname, Jocelyn Loftus. Leaving London, he visited his country-seat in the north of England, where he passed some time. The abdication of Fontainebleau and the retreat of the Emperor Napoleon to Elba giving peace to Europe, the young nobleman visited the Continent, where he stayed some months. On returning to England, he made the tour of Kent, and at length arrived in Canterbury. The old cathedral city, with its quietude and its many antiquarian remains, together with its beautiful circumjacent scenery, was pleasing to Lord Algernon Cavendish, and he was induced to remain there for a few weeks.

One evening, after a long ramble in the country, he was returning to his hotel, when on passing through the cloistral avenue in the vicinage of the cathedral he suddenly heard voices in altercation, and before he reached the spot a sufficiency of what was said reached his ears to afford him a very painful insight into the nature of the dispute. A female

was reproaching some one of the male sex in the bitterest terms, reminding him that years back he had seduced her, and that he had even been base enough to propose to her the murder of the child which was the offspring of their illicit amour. The female went on to upbraid her companion with having shamefully abandoned her at the time, and by his cruelties plunged her into that frenzied state of mind which had led her to become the murderess of her babe.

Algernon, horrified at what he had heard, was so bewildered that he scarcely knew what he was doing, and instead of retreating unperceived, he remained rooted to the spot, a turning in the cloister still concealing him from the disputants and them from him. But suddenly the female gave vent to a loud cry, imploring mercy, and her companion, in a terrible voice, denounced her as his "evil genius" and threatened to kill her outright. Thereupon Algernon sprang forward, and beheld in the gathering gloom of the hour and the place a female upon her knees at the feet of an individual whom he immediately recognized to be the Reverend Bernard Audley, with whom he had formed some slight acquaintance at a reading-room during his sojourn in Canterbury. The female, who was dressed in deep black, was, as the reader of course understands, none other than Lilian Halkin. But with her name, or anything concerning her beyond what he had just heard, Algernon was at the time utterly unacquainted. The minor canon's hand was raised to strike her down, but he instantly fell back, with an ejaculation of alarm, while Lilian sprang to her feet the moment he thus made his appearance.

Then, quickly drawing down her veil, Lilian seized Algernon by the arm, saying, in a quick and excited voice, "Thanks, a thousand thanks, whoever you are, for your well-meant interference, but unless you promise me one thing I shall not continue to experience any gratitude toward you." Algernon at once replied that he had no interest in doing anything to produce vexation in respect to a lady who, judging from what he had heard, was already sufficiently afflicted. "Then, promise me, kind-hearted stranger," said Lilian, "that you will not expose elsewhere this scene of which accident has made you a witness." The young nobleman answered, "You may rely upon it, madam, that the private affairs of yourself and Mr. Audley shall not

be made the topic of useless scandal or idle gossip on my part." Lilian thanked him cordially, and then hurried away. "I also thank you, Mr. Loftus, for the pledge you have just given," said Bernard Audley, so soon as they were alone together; but Algernon merely bowed coldly, and passing hurriedly on, retraced his way to the hotel where he was stopping.

We need not do more than in a few words remind the reader that it was through Bernard Audley's insolent conduct toward Louisa Stanley in the Dane John that Algernon subsequently became acquainted with the beauteous damsel. This incident occurred a short time after the adventure in the cloister, which the young nobleman was compelled to fling as a menace at the infamous clergyman in order to force him to a precipitate departure from the scene of his gross attempt to undermine the purity of Louisa. Thanks to this incident, Algernon was at length brought in contact with a charming, amiable, and excellent girl answering the very description of that embodiment of all female excellences which he depicted to himself as the being that could alone win his heart or be deserving of his hand. We have seen how he cultivated her acquaintance, how each day his favourable opinion of her grew confirmed, and how the more he saw of her the more her amiable qualities developed themselves. At first he thought, when resolved to declare his love, of frankly stating who he was; but then the idea struck him that he would still retain the *incognito*, or, rather, his assumed name, in order to convince himself beyond all possibility of doubt that the humble cottage maiden could love him for himself alone, irrespective of his lordly rank. Moreover, he felt so truly ashamed of the profligacies, the vices, and the immoralities associated with the name of the Marquis of Leveson that he shrank from the idea of confessing himself to be the nephew of that unprincipled voluptuary. He therefore continued in Louisa's eyes as plain Jocelyn Loftus. When his love had been declared and he delicately furnished just so much information respecting himself that Louisa's sister Clara, then in London, might make inquiries concerning his eligibility as Louisa's suitor, he wrote to his banker, giving that gentleman instructions to what extent he was to speak of him to any one calling to take such references, and hence the guarded manner

in which the banker spoke when Clara visited him for the purpose.

Having become the accepted suitor of Louisa, Algernon's intention was to bear her away after the bridal to his country-seat in the north of England, and to transport thither her invalid aunt also. But when last at his rural mansion, he had observed that much of the furniture was in a dilapidated condition and that considerable repairs were required for the dwelling itself. Moreover, it was necessary to have a carriage built expressly for the purpose of the long journey which the aunt would have to take, and paralyzed as she then was, the vehicle must be fitted internally with a couch for her accommodation. To effect all this, a considerable sum of money was needed, and though Algernon was far from extravagant, yet his frequent tours and journeys had exhausted all the resources arising from his comparatively narrow income of six hundred a year. He required a couple of thousand guineas, and had to choose from three ways of obtaining that amount. The first was to mortgage a portion of his income, but this would be to reduce it to so small a revenue as to render it impossible to provide as he could wish for his Louisa and her aunt at his country-seat. The second plan which suggested itself was to borrow money on the security of his expectations as heir to the title and estates of his uncle the marquis, but he abhorred the idea of giving post-obit bonds and entering into the demoralization of usurious proceedings. The third method was to apply direct to his uncle; and much as he disliked the thought of coming in contact with that nobleman, especially to ask a favour, he was nevertheless compelled to make up his mind to this proceeding.

After some deliberation with himself, he to a certain extent surmounted his scruples by the reflection that, as the heir to the estates of the marquis, it was scarcely a favour which he would be asking, especially if he did it in a frank and manly way, without servility or cringing. He therefore proceeded to London, visited his uncle, and procured the money. Losing no time, he remitted a sufficient sum to the steward of his little estate in the north, accompanied with instructions how it was to be expended in the purchase of furniture and the repairs of the mansion, and he gave orders to a carriage-builder in London for the construction of a vehicle with the

accommodations requisite for the use of the then invalid aunt of his Louisa.

But all these preparations for his bridal were somewhat prematurely taken, for, as we have seen, the circumstance of his encounter with Mary Owen made him acquainted with that conspiracy against the Princess of Wales which hurried him on into the series of adventures, and whirled him, as it were, through the storm of incidents that have been duly described in our pages.

Now at last these adventures were finished, those incidents had been brought to a conclusion, and we behold our young hero, no longer Jocelyn Loftus, nor, indeed, as Lord Algernon Cavendish, but as the Marquis of Leveson, reunited to her whom he loved so fondly and whom he was shortly to make his bride.

The reader is now acquainted with all that has hitherto been wrapped up in mystery relative to this excellent young man, and it was the outline of the above explanations which, after dinner at the cottage, he gave to Miss Stanley, Lady Sackville, and Louisa. We need scarcely observe that he touched but lightly upon those particulars that threw out the characters of his departed uncle and perished sister in so disagreeable a light; and this reserve he practised partly from generous motives in respect to the dead, and partly because some of the details were unsuitable for the ears of the innocent Louisa.

On the following day Miss Stanley, the aunt, in a private conversation with the Marquis of Leveson, made him acquainted with that fresh outrage which Bernard Audley had attempted to perpetrate, and which had been the cause of her restoration to vitality and consciousness. The young nobleman was deeply indignant at this narrative. But when he learned from Miss Stanley's lips of that history of the past regarding Mrs. Owen, Melissa, and Lilian, and thereby was informed that the lady in black whom he had seen in the cloister could have been none other than Lilian herself, he resolved upon consigning Bernard Audley's recent atrocity to oblivion. For Miss Stanley knew not that all Lilian's long-cherished love for that bad man had recently turned into the deadliest hate, accompanied by cravings for a bitter vengeance, and thus the young marquis was left with the impression that the unfortunate Lilian was still

attached to her seducer. For this reason was it, and for Lilian's sake, that he came to the determination of passing over the minor canon's conduct in silence, especially as he had made up his mind to remain altogether at Canterbury until, after a decent period of mourning for his sister and uncle, he might lead Louisa to the altar. In the meantime he would be near to guard her from any further danger, although not for an instant did he imagine that so long as he was upon the spot the infamous clergyman would renew his persecutions.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLIFF

THE scene now changes to Dover.

It was the day following that of which we have been writing, and a lady, elegantly dressed, was sauntering alone upon the eminences which terminate abruptly in the chalky cliffs fronting the sea. She was tall and well formed, but her countenance was concealed with a thick veil, folded in such a manner that not even the keenest eyes could penetrate through it so as to discern her features.

To all appearance, judging by her figure, which was very slender, but perfectly upright, and replete with symmetrical grace, she was by no means advanced in years, and as she walked slowly along, her feet and ankles which glanced beneath her dress seemed most delicately shaped. Altogether, she was one whom it was impossible to pass by with indifference, and the air of mystery with which the thick veil, so carefully folded, invested her, added to the interest of her appearance.

It was midday, and the sun was shining gloriously. Calm as an immense lake of quicksilver stretched the sea far away, until it was bounded in the eastern horizon by a barely perceptible line which marked the coast of France. Not a breeze ruffled the surface of the ocean, and the sails of the vessels hung, as it were, listless and passive to the masts.

Slowly did the lady continue her walk, but frequently stopping to gaze upon the mighty expanse of waters which stretched before her from the base of the cliffs on whose summit she was sauntering. And yet it did not altogether seem that she thus paused to view the enchanting prospect, but by her very attitude and manner it was evident that through the thick folds of her veil she was gazing upon

vacancy. Several times she turned quite around, and looked in the direction of the town which lay at the foot of the deep indentation of the cliffs, as if a hollow had been hewn away to afford room for the site of that multitude of buildings. Was she awaiting some one? Had she sauntered hither in the hope of being overtaken by a person that she expected to issue from the town and speed across the heights to join her there?

Presently the sounds of a horse's feet reached her ears as she was pursuing her walk, and now a sudden vibration appeared to thrill through her entire form, galvanizing her, as it were, with the electricity of some feeling abruptly and profoundly stirred. But this time she neither paused nor looked around. She continued her way as if simulating unconsciousness that any one was approaching her.

In a few minutes she was overtaken by the person on horseback, and this was none other than the Reverend Bernard Audley, minor canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

On reaching the lady he reined in his steed, and made a courteous bow, saying, "I am here, fair but mysterious unknown, in pursuance of the billet which I received last evening at my hotel."

"How know you that I am fair?" asked the lady, in a voice that was barely audible.

"Do you not tell me in that note which I received," said the clergyman, "that I have inspired you with a passion which, if I can reciprocate it, you will be found worthy of? And what does that mean, if not a consciousness on your part that you are beautiful?"

The lady made no reply, and a silence of nearly a minute took place. Then, leaping from his horse, Bernard Audley said, in his most winning tone, "Do, for Heaven's sake, shake off this timidity, if such it be. Throw aside all mystery, and let me behold the countenance of whose loveliness I have a presentiment."

"Pray, Mr. Audley, remount your horse," said the lady, still speaking in a very low voice, but now with much agitation in the tones. "We shall be seen, and it looks all too familiar for you to have dismounted thus to walk by my side. It appears like an appointment given, whereas, if you keep on horseback, it will have the air of a simple acquaintance happening to meet a lady. Indeed, it was for this

reason that I charged you in my note to come mounted upon that slendid steed which you manage so well, and on whose back you appear to such advantage. Mount then, I conjure you."

The minor canon did not immediately obey the lady's injunction. He looked very hard at her with all the power of his searching eyes, as if to penetrate through the veil which concealed her countenance, and for a moment it was evident enough, by the expression which passed rapidly over his features, that he did not altogether like the strangeness of her behaviour, and that even some slight suspicion of intended evil had flitted across his mind. But apparently a second thought reassured him, or at least determined him to humour his fair companion; and he accordingly remounted the spirited steed, which for the last minute or two he had held by the bridle. Again, however, did he scan the lady from head to foot, and then he muttered to himself, " Yes, it is her figure. But surely it cannot be she."

" What were you saying? " asked the lady, looking up at him through the folds of her veil.

" I was thinking," he answered, his eyes still fixed intently upon her, " that you remind me strangely of another lady whom I know well, and yet she is in deep mourning."

" Oh, we will not talk of other ladies now," said the veiled unknown, somewhat petulantly, but still in a very subdued voice.

" Now, listen to me," said Bernard Audley, in a resolute tone. " If all that your letter told me be true, I am highly flattered by its contents. In that note you say that for the last few days you have observed me riding on the parade and elsewhere, and that you have been struck by my appearance. This, I repeat, is most flattering, most complimentary. You tell me likewise in your note that you wish me to meet you here soon after midday, and that I am to come on horseback, as if merely for a ride upon the cliffs. I have obeyed your summons, I am here. But now, wherefore, for even the space of these few minutes that have elapsed since I joined you, preserve so much mystery? Why continue to wear that invidious veil over your features, and why speak in subdued tones, as if you sought to disguise your voice? Before we proceed any farther together, do me the favour to lift your veil."

During the short space which the colloquy, so far as it went, had occupied, the lady had continued walking onward; and in so doing she had approached nearer than at first to the edge of the cliffs, so that they were now within a dozen yards of the abyss.

"You would have me raise my veil," the lady now suddenly exclaimed, "in order that you may see my countenance? Behold it, then!" she added, in her natural voice, and flinging back her veil over her elegant bonnet, she revealed the features of Lilian Halkin.

"Ah!" ejaculated the minor canon, "for the last two or three minutes I have not been altogether unprepared for this," and reining in his steed, he fixed his looks intently upon Lilian's countenance, as if he sought to fathom her purpose.

She also stopped short, and encountering his gaze with solemn seriousness of aspect, she said, "Bernard Audley, for the last time we meet, and I wish you to hear a few words from my lips ere we part for ever."

"Well, speak then, Lilian," said the minor canon, scarcely able to conceal an expression of joy which rose to his features at the idea of being thenceforth rid of the continual supervision of one whom he regarded as his evil genius. "But tell me," he immediately added, "is it in friendship or enmity that you have so cunningly contrived this meeting, which you say is to be our last? Wherefore have you thrown aside your mourning? Was it the better to inveigle me hither to this interview? Or, rather, I should ask, why all this preparation, precaution, and mystery at all? Since you found out where I was residing, wherefore did you not come direct to me at the hotel and speak to me there? Are your proceedings ever to be characterized by this sort of romantic mysticism which you doubtless think invests you with a kind of terrorism over me, so as to enable you to wield an influence upon all my actions? Speak, Lilian, I await your explanations."

"I shall not detain you long," was the reply. "I have heard you patiently. It is now your turn to listen with equal attention to me, for this is the last time that you and I shall ever meet in this world. As I told you the other day, in the Dane John, you consider me your evil genius, but for a long series of years have I loved you with all a

woman's most enduring tenderness. But let that pass; I would speak of other things. Do you suppose that I am a stranger to the vile outrage which you attempted upon Louisa Stanley the other night, and which has made you, dreading the consequences, absent yourself from home for a time and come to Dover, so that in case of danger you may be near the French coast? Ah! you perceive, Bernard Audley, that I understand full well your motives in coming hither."

"And what of that?" asked the minor canon, impatiently. "But go on, Lilian, for I warn you that my horse will not stand quietly here for many minutes longer."

"Nor will I detain you many minutes," she rejoined, quickly. "When you went to settle at Canterbury, some eighteen months ago, and took up your abode in that old house which had so recently been a lunatic asylum, and had still some of the rooms fitted up in such a manner as to deaden the shrieks and screams and howlings of those who were once confined therein, you are aware that I also came and settled in the same neighbourhood. You know, likewise, that in consequence of all that occurred in years past, I had vowed never to appear again in the presence of any of my family; but at the time when all those terrible calamities occurred, or, rather, soon after the fearful ordeal of prisonage and trial through which I passed, I secretly made inquiries relative to my sisters. I learned that Melissa had died, leaving two children whose names were Clara and Louisa. Ah! you start, you begin to divine the truth? Well, and it is as you think. For not only did I discover that much, but I likewise ascertained that they had been taken by their aunt, my eldest sister, Lydia, and borne away from London, no one knew whither. Now, then, do you begin to understand how, when eighteen months ago circumstances brought me to Canterbury, I happened to learn that a lady having two nieces, whose names were Clara and Louisa, dwelt in a certain cottage under the name of Stanley, and how I was at once convinced that this lady was my sister and these damsels were Melissa's children? Ah! it was this circumstance which made me doubly watchful over Louisa's welfare and safety when I found her the object of your unhallowed desires; and though I chose not to introduce myself as a relative to that young maiden, I nevertheless

vowed to become her protecting genius. Bernard Audley, you now understand that it was my own niece, my dead sister's offspring, whom you would have basely sacrificed to your passion."

"But I knew not of this relationship between you," exclaimed the minor canon, growing still more impatient than at first, especially as his steed was pawing the ground in a restless manner.

"No, you knew it not," said Lilian, "but even if you had been aware of the circumstance, it would not have stayed the wild career of your passions. Oh, man of infamy, hast thou no fear for the future, thou who makest such a bad use of the present? But the time for vengeance has arrived. Too long, oh, far too long, have I endured your scorn, your indifference, perhaps even your hate, I who sacrificed everything and endured so much on your account. Yes, Bernard Audley, I now hate as much as I once loved, and when the love of a woman turns to hatred, it is bitterness indeed."

"Lilian, you are mad. I leave you," exclaimed the minor canon, and he endeavoured to wheel his horse around so as to gallop back over the heights.

But Lilian Halkin, with a wild cry, extended her arms suddenly, and rushed forward in such a manner that the steed started in affright and reared straight up. Then thrilled forth a still wilder cry from the lips of Bernard Audley, through whose brain flashed a harrowing sense of the fearful catastrophe that must ensue. Desperately did he dash his heels into the flanks of his steed, in the hope of making him spring forward, but Lilian, now inspired with the malignant fury of a fiend, waved her white handkerchief before the eyes of the terrified animal, who backed suddenly and reared again. All this was the work of a few moments, and the next instant over they went, horse and man!

Terrific were the cries of both as they fell down the abyss, and Lilian, standing upon the very edge of the cliff, beheld the frightful fall. In another instant all was still, the catastrophe was accomplished, the steed and its master lay motionless upon the beach below.

Then Lilian Halkin turned away and fled precipitately. At a distance down the sloping eminences she met some persons, to whom, with a real horror in her looks, — for

"THE NEXT INSTANT OVER THEY WENT"
Photogravure from original by Merrill.

Audley,
my dead
sacrificed

know nail of this relationship between you," ex-
minor canon, growing still more impatient than
especially as his steed was pawing the ground in a

"No, you know it not," said Lilian. "Had you
been aware of the circumstances, it would have stayed
the wild career of your passions. Oh, even at this hour
thou no fear for the future, thou who unheed-
ing of the present! But the time for vengeance has arrived.
Too long, oh, too too long, have I endured your scorn, your
indifference, perhaps your hate. I who sacrificed
everything and endured so much on your account. Yes,
Edward Audley, I now tell you that I do love, and
with the love of a woman who knows no bounds. It is hopeless
indeed.

"Lilian, you are mad. I leave you," exclaimed the minor
canon, and he endeavored to wheel his horse around so as

cry, extended her arms
a manner that the
ded
,
the fearful
Desperately did he dash the
the steed, in the hope of making him
, now inspired with the strongest
ed her white hands before the
, who, terrified and scared
ments, and the

down the abyss,
the cliff, beheld
was still, the catas-
master lay mo-

"THE NEXT INSTANT OVER THEY WENT"

Photogravure from original by Merrill.

tately.
she met some
r looks, — for

this there was no need to simulate, — she declared that a terrible accident had just occurred.

They descended by the shortest way to the beach, and there beheld the minor canon and the horse both dead and frightfully mangled. Lilian, however, remained at a distance, but when the persons rejoined her again, they told her she would have to give evidence at a coroner's inquest. This she did, and with a manner utterly defying suspicion that she herself had been the cause of the catastrophe, did she give a feasible version of the occurrence. The jury were satisfied, a verdict of " Accidental death " was returned, and Lilian Halkin embarked for France.

On the morning which followed that of her departure, Miss Stanley received a letter containing these words:

" Dover.

" My dear Lydia: — I am about to quit England for ever. Bernard Audley is no more. I beheld him perish in a manner that will doubtless strike you as being fraught with retributive justice for the evil he has done me. It was a shocking accident that caused his death, and it was a strange chance that rendered me the spectatress thereof. The newspapers will furnish you with full particulars.

" At present I know not where I shall fix my abode, nor whether, indeed, I shall adopt any settled habitation at all. The agitation of my thoughts and the whirlwind which rages in my mind appear only to be compatible with a wild, erratic existence.

" But you shall hear from me occasionally; and as I must now be dependent upon you for my bread, I shall periodically let you know to what address you can forward me the trifle that will suffice for my wants. Had you continued poor, Lydia, I would sooner have begged my bread than have encroached upon your bounty, but as there is now wealth in the family, I hesitate not to crave the pittance which may sustain me.

" We shall never meet again, dear Lydia, but you and all who are dear to you will constantly be present in my thoughts.

" Your affectionate sister,

" The Unfortunate Lilian."

Thus was it that she kept her own secret respecting the real cause of Bernard Audley's horrible death, and thus was it also that no member of the family to which she belonged ever had to experience a sickening at the heart through the knowledge that Lilian was a murderess.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GATHERING OF A STORM

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when the Hangman paid a visit to his friend Bencull at the den of infamy in Jacob's Island. On being admitted by the master of the place, Daniel Coffin said, in a rough, impatient tone, " Well, what's the matter? Is anything amiss? Why did you send up that pressing message just now to tell me to come down at once? "

" Can't you wait a minute or two, till we are cosy in the back room together? " asked Bencull. " But you don't give a feller time even to shut the door."

" Well, look sharp about it," said the Hangman, " 'cause why, I don't like these sudden messages, — they make one afraid."

The door being secured, the two ruffians passed into the back room, where Bencull at once produced pipes and a bottle of spirits.

" Now, then, what is it all about? " demanded the Hangman.

" Why, I don't much like summat that I see this afternoon," answered Bencull. " There was that Buttoner feller talking to old Mother Franklin at the corner of the street where Mrs. Young lives."

" Is that all? " asked the Hangman, contemptuously. " Why shouldn't the Buttoner stop and chat with old Mother Franklin? Didn't he live for some time with Nell Gibson at Mrs. Young's, and isn't it natural enough, then, that he should look on Mother Franklin as an old acquaintance? "

" Well and good," responded Bencull, " but there's a great deal to be judged of by the manner of people, and also by any little word or two that one may catch accidentally."

"Go on and tell us what you mean, without this round-about palaver," and as the Hangman spoke he tossed off a glass of gin.

"First of all," continued Bencull, "I saw that the Buttoner and Mother Franklin was talking in a very peculiar and confidential way, as if they had some matter of importance in hand. The Buttoner once or twice put his hand up to his head, and looked, just for all the world, like a chap that is full of remorse; and then Mother Franklin spoke to him with great earnestness, as if trying to persuade him to tell her summat. So I watched the opportunity, got around behind 'em, and then sauntered up as if quite in a promiscuous way. They didn't see me till I was close upon them, and I heard them both mention the name of Nell Gibson."

"Ah! this does really, then, begin to look serious," observed the Hangman. "But what next?"

"When they saw me they both looked precious confused. The Buttoner stared at me in quite a suspicious way, just like a chap that means to peach. But that old wretch, Mother Franklin, immediately recovered her presence of mind, and, taking a pinch of snuff, wagged her old jaws and said summat in what she meant to be a good-humoured way. I pretended not to have noticed anything queer, and very soon walked on. Then I at once came back home again, and sent the Durrynacker straight up to you. The Mushroom Faker called soon after, and I told him also what had happened. They are both coming back presently."

"But you don't think the Buttoner really means peaching?" asked Coffin, a diabolical expression settling upon his countenance.

"I have my fears, I can tell you," answered Bencull, "or else why the deuce should I have sent up for you, or told those fellers to come back again? Don't you recollect how the Buttoner behaved that night when we did Nell's business? The moment the gal was strangled, didn't the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cry like a child? Why, I recollect perfectly well you roared out to ask what the devil was the meaning of that blubbering — "

"Ah! and I recollect, too, now you speak of it," interrupted the Hangman. "The Buttoner said it was only a sort of nervous fit that he could not help for the moment."

"Ay," added Bencull, "and he cried out for us to take

her away and not let her stare up at him with her eyes that was fixed and dull as if made of glass; and he trembled all over with convulsions."

"So he did," remarked the Hangman, "and while you and me shoved the dead body over into the dike, we were obliged to leave the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durrynacker here to look after the Buttoner. But what has the Buttoner been doing ever since then? I don't think I have seen him more than once or twice."

"For the last two or three months I haven't seen him at all," said Bencull, "until this afternoon. It's true I hadn't thought much about him, because he is often out on the tramp for several months together; but when he turned up in this queer way just now, and I saw him with old Mother Franklin, it made me feel just as if I was all of a sudden in Queer Street. I say, Dan'el, I suppose you know pretty well that Mother Franklin doesn't like you a bit?"

"The old harridan!" growled the Hangman, "she wants to be tumbled over into the ditch. But, I say, this is getting rather serious about the Buttoner —"

At this moment there was a knock at the street door, and Bencull at once observed, "Here's the other coves."

He then proceeded to answer the summons, and speedily returned, accompanied by the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker.

The four ruffians now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate on the threatening aspect which affairs appeared to have assumed in respect to the murder of Nell Gibson. Several plans were discussed. The Mushroom Faker proposed that they should entice, or convey by force, both Mother Franklin and the Buttoner down to the crib and make away with them. Bob the Durrynacker suggested flight, but Bencull was inclined to support the Mushroom Faker's murderous project. The Hangman sat listening in silence to the deliberations that were thus going on.

"Well, why don't you say what you think?" asked Bencull. "Come, Dan'el, speak out."

"I hardly know what to decide upon," was his response. "As for bolting, that's altogether out of the question. I tell you what I will do," he added, after a few moments' reflection, "I'll just toddle up to Mrs. Young's and see how things look there."

This suggestion was cordially approved of by his companions, and the Hangman accordingly proceeded forthwith to the neighbouring street where Mrs. Young dwelt. On arriving there, he was admitted by old Mother Franklin, who for a moment looked as if she were startled by his appearance; but immediately recovering herself, she said, with a grin, " Well, Mr. Coffin, so you have come to see us again, eh? You don't desert us altogether. But it's a long time since you have been here. I don't think since Nell Gibson left us," and she looked very hard in the Hangman's face as she thus spoke.

" I have not had any business down this way since then," answered Coffin, whose features betrayed not the slightest indication of conscious guilt. " Is Mrs. Young in? "

" No, she be not," replied Mother Franklin. " But you can walk into the parlour, Mr. Coffin, and wait till she comes."

Thus speaking, the old woman threw open the door, and the public executioner passed into the room. He found no one there, and taking a seat, asked, " How long will Mrs. Young be before she comes back? "

" Not above half an hour or so," was Mother Franklin's response. Then, as she took a huge pinch of snuff from her box with an indecent picture on the lid, she said, " Will you take anything, Mr. Coffin? "

" That's one word for me and two for yourself," answered the Hangman, affecting a good-humoured smile. " Well, get some gin," and he flung half a crown upon the table.

The old woman sped forth to secure the liquor, and when she returned, in about five minutes, Coffin said, " Now you shall mix two glasses, one for yourself and one for me. I don't know how it is, but I think I am no great favourite of yours, just because I chaffed you on one occasion."

" Yes, when you was here to see Nell Gibson," Mother Franklin hastened to add; and the quickness with which she spoke brought on a fit of coughing that nearly choked her and made the scalding rheum run down her wrinkled cheeks.

" Now, then, old woman," observed the Hangman, " you will go out of the world in one of those shaky fits, if you don't mind."

" Ah, well, I suppose my time ain't wery far off," she replied, wagging her toothless jaws. " I am eighty-two

come next Febiverry, and have had a pretty long run of it. Ah! and I have seen a many strange things, too, a blessed many things, Mr. Coffin."

"No doubt of it," he answered. "But come, let us drink to a better understanding betwixt us. I recollect I threw a shilling at you once and called you an old beldame. I was very wrong, but I only did it in fun. There's no harm in me. I am as innocent and as quiet as any lamb, though perhaps I don't look much like one."

Mother Franklin stared at him as if, indeed, she thought that he was very far from having a lamblike appearance, and there was something in her look which Coffin did not fancy, for it seemed to confirm the dark suspicions which Bencull's information had already engendered.

"Howsomever," he continued, affecting a jocular mood, "if I flung you a shilling once and called you an old beldame, I now toss you a guinea and call you a dear good old creature."

He suited the action to the word with regard to the money, and Mother Franklin, taking it up, was evidently much rejoiced at so unexpected a present.

"Where's Mrs. Young gone?" asked the Hangman.

"I don't know," was the response. "She's on'y just stepped out a bit."

"Well, it struck me I saw her just now," remarked the Hangman, assuming a careless tone and look, "and I thought that the Buttoner was with her."

The statement he thus made was false, but he spoke in this manner in order to see what effect the mention of the Buttoner's name would have upon Mother Franklin.

"Very likely," she answered, taking another pinch of snuff.

"Oh, then the Buttoner has turned up again?" said the Hangman. "I have not seen him this long while. Where's he been?"

"I am sure I don't know," rejoined Mother Franklin, somewhat roughly, and she again looked very hard at the public executioner, as if to ascertain whether he had any sinister object in putting these questions.

"Ah! but I happen to know," proceeded Coffin, observing how she regarded him, and fully comprehending the nature of her scrutiny, so that his suspicion of something being

wrong was now fully confirmed, " I happen to know that he does speak pretty frankly to you."

" Well, I suppose that Bencull has told you he saw me and the Buttoner talking together this arternoon. But what of that? " asked the old woman. " I suppose that old acquaintances may stop and chat if they like."

" How you are going on! " interrupted the Hangman, affecting to laugh. " Why, of course old acquaintances will talk, and I suppose that, as I am an old acquaintance also, there is no harm in my asking about the Buttoner in a friendly way. I always thought he was a good fellow, and was glad to hear he had come back to London again. Will he be here to-night? "

" I can't say," replied Mother Franklin.

" But he did go out with Mrs. Young, didn't he, now? "

" No," she returned, " he did not," and though she looked with bold hardihood in the Hangman's face, he nevertheless saw right well that his random assertion had conveyed a truth and that the Buttoner had actually gone out with Mrs. Young.

" Well, then," he rejoined, " I can positively declare that I saw them together."

" And what if you did? " demanded Mother Franklin. " It's no business of mine, or of yourn either. What's it got to do with us? I suppose you don't care where the Buttoner goes, or who he goes with."

" Not a fig," answered the Hangman. Then, having taken a long draught of gin and water, he said, with apparent carelessness of manner, " By the bye, any news of Nell Gibson? I wonder what the deuce has become of that gal. What made her bolt, do you think, from this place? She didn't owe your missus any money, did she? "

" Not a farthing. She had plenty of money, as I dare say you very well know," and Mother Franklin nodded significantly at the public executioner.

" Yes, there had been some little affairs — the Shooter's Hill business, for instance — which had put some money into all our pockets, and Nell had her share. But you haven't told me whether anything has been heard of her? "

" How should I know? " asked Mother Franklin, snappishly. " Nell was no favourite of mine. She used to give herself precious airs toward me and — But no matter. I

don't bear the poor thing any more ill-will, wherever she is."

"Isn't it strange," asked the Hangman, totally unabashed, "that nothing's been heard of her for so long?"

"Wery strange indeed," answered Mother Franklin. "The last night I ever saw her I remember I was uncommon lushy, and she said some cutting things to me. The Buttoner came to fetch her away, and she never returned no more."

"Where did he take her to?" asked Coffin, looking as innocent as his hangdog countenance would permit him.

"Ah! that's more than I can say. If I had known at the time, I should have gone and inquired after her when I found that she didn't come back."

"Well, I suppose, now that you have seen the Buttoner again, you have asked him what became of Nell?" and Daniel Coffin once more looked very hard in Mother Franklin's face.

At this moment the street door was heard to open, evidently by means of a latch-key, and Mother Franklin observed, "Here's missus," having said which she went forth very hurriedly into the passage, as if to give some warning, or intercept Mrs. Young and the person who had just entered with her; for that the mistress of the house had returned with a companion was apparent from the sounds of two persons' footsteps in the passage.

The Hangman, instantaneously suspecting that Mrs. Young's companion was the Buttoner, and recognizing in Mother Franklin's sudden disappearance a further proof that treachery was intended, lost no time in following her into the passage, and there, sure enough, he beheld the paramour of the murdered Nell Gibson. There was a light in the passage, and the Hangman's countenance was seen to grow instantaneously diabolic in its expression, but in a moment, mastering his rage, he extended his hand to the Buttoner, saying, "Ah, old fellow! I heard that you had come back. How do you find yourself?"

The man, who had a very miserable and downcast aspect, as if a load of care were upon his mind, said, "I can't shake hands with you, Coffin. I have something here that won't let me," and he placed his hand upon his heart.

"What the devil does all this mean?" growled the Hang-

man, not knowing exactly what to do, or whether to resent this conduct on the part of the Buttoner; but the next moment, thinking it best to take his departure, he exclaimed, "Come, stand aside and let me be off. I see very well that I am not wanted here."

But the Buttoner placed his back against the street door, saying, "You can't go," and at the same moment both Mrs. Young and Mother Franklin seized upon the public executioner like two tiger-cats, the elder woman, despite her great age, being, if anything, the more ferocious of the two.

For an instant the Hangman was overpowered in that narrow passage, but the next moment he burst away from the two women, dashing Mrs. Young into the parlour, and trampling old Mother Franklin under his feet. Their cries were horrible, and now the Buttoner sprang at the Hangman, threw his arms around his neck, and clung to him with the tenacity of a boa-constrictor. They fell, struggling desperately, in the passage, and several females who belonged to the house of ill-fame, being alarmed by the noise, came rushing down the stairs, some in a state of more than seminudity. Without comprehending the motive which led to the attack upon the Hangman, but zealous in taking the part of the mistress of the place, they at once precipitated themselves upon Coffin, against whom Mrs. Young was levelling the most horrible menaces.

But the Hangman was not yet overpowered. He possessed a lion's strength, and was now as desperate as the maddened beast itself when the hunters hold it at bay. With one tremendous effort he shook off the female furies who had pounced upon him, released himself from the grasp of the Buttoner, and with the iron heel of his great thick boot dealt that individual such a blow that left him senseless upon the floor, where he lay. Another instant and the Hangman's hand was upon the latch of the street door, but again did the females from up-stairs dart upon him, while Mrs. Young herself reappeared from the parlour, armed with the poker.

Through the posse of furies rushed the Hangman, scattering them in the passage as a bull dashes aside right and left a crowd when careering through it; and in another moment the formidable weapon was wrenched from Mrs.

Young's hand. Then striking all about at random, thus doing serious injury, and even breaking bones, the Hangman regained the front door, sprang forth, and hurried away as quickly as his legs would carry him.

His ideas being all in confusion, he instinctively sped in the direction of Jacob's Island; but as he neared that spot the thought suddenly struck him that there might be danger there. He accordingly turned aside, took another direction, gained London Bridge, traversed it, and reaching the City, hastened along toward Fleet Lane.

But while pursuing his way, his ideas began to settle themselves in his mind, and it struck him that if there were danger for him at Jacob's Island, there might be likewise peril at his own house; that is to say, if the Buttoner had peached and the constables were on the lookout, he would stand the same chance of being arrested in Fleet Lane as at Bencull's crib. He stopped short, and stood irresolute how to act. He felt as if the crisis of his destiny were at hand. What could he do? The very worst was to be apprehended. Everything seemed to indicate that the Buttoner had already peached relative to Nell Gibson's murder, or that he meant to do so. Else why should he and the women have sought to detain him?

The Hangman turned into one of the narrow streets leading down toward Cripplegate, and entering a low boozing-ken, he went into the public-room, sat down, and called for liquor and a pipe. No one besides himself happened to be in the room at the time, and he was glad to have this opportunity of deliberating seriously upon the course which he should pursue. Taking a draught of the liquor which was provided, and lighting his pipe, he set himself to think. But his reflections brought no comfort. Dangers stared him in the face, and he who had twined the halter around the neck of so many now felt as if it were twining around his own.

He thought of flying from London, but whither could he go? He knew full well that it would be difficult to disguise himself, and that if a hue and cry were raised, his recognition would be inevitable. Besides, he did not happen to have much money in his pocket at the time, and he was well aware how impossible it was to get on without a plentiful supply of the needful. He determined, therefore, to stay in London,

at least until the morrow; and while revolving in his mind the different places where he thought he might lie hid, he remembered Taggarty's chandlery shop on Mutton Hill, Clerkenwell.

Issuing forth from the boozing-ken, he was proceeding in the direction of Clerkenwell, when he suddenly recollected the disinclination which Taggarty had evinced to harbour him on that occasion when he called there and met Sally and Dick Melmoth, after his escape from drowning in the Thames, at the time of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's.

"Bill Taggarty," he said to himself, "wouldn't have me then, and it's no use my going to him now. And yet he is very friendly with Dick and Sally. He brought them up, as one may say, when he was the Kinchin-Grand, and therefore he wouldn't mind going and letting them know that I have got into trouble and must see one of them as soon as possible."

Therefore, without any further hesitation, the Hangman pursued his way toward Mutton Hill, and shortly entered the little chandlery shop kept by William Taggarty.

This individual was seated in the small parlour behind the shop, but the moment the glazed door communicating with the street opened and the little bell tinkled, Taggarty came forth.

"Hullo, Dan'el! is that you?" said the chandler, who, not knowing that anything was wrong, now seemed tolerably cordial in his welcome, although the Hangman was no great favourite of his; but it suited his purpose to keep on as good terms as possible with all those persons who were acquainted with his antecedents.

"Yes, it's me as large as life, Bill," returned the Hangman. "But let's step inside into your parlour, for I want to talk to you a bit."

Into the little room behind the shop did Taggarty accordingly lead the way, and producing his gin-bottle and glasses, he sat down, the Hangman already having thrown himself upon a seat.

"Is anything the matter?" asked the chandler, now observing that there was a certain degree of trouble in Coffin's looks.

"Well, I can't say things are quite as right as they should be," responded the Hangman. "But when do you usually shut up this shop of yours?"

"About ten, but to-night, being Saturday, I keep it open until twelve."

"Well, it's just close upon twelve now," observed Coffin, "and so I suppose you can shut up at once, can't you?"

"Do you want me to do anything for you?" asked Taggarty.

"Yes, I don't exactly feel it convenient to go home," rejoined Coffin, "and therefore I want you to run down and tell Sal that she must come up and see me at once."

"What, in the middle of the night?" exclaimed the chandler. "Then there must be really summut very unpleasant that's occurred?"

"In plain terms, Bill," said the Hangman, "I am afraid that the traps are after me."

"What for? Some new affair?" asked Taggarty.

"Oh, I will tell you all about it when you come back. You go and fetch Sally or Dick, but I would rather have Sally, of the two."

"By the bye, what's become of Jack the Foundling?" inquired the chandler, as he rose from his seat and put on his hat to depart on the errand now entrusted to him.

"Oh, he's been out of my hands a long time," answered Coffin, "and I don't know what the deuce has become of him. He got well-nigh killed on Westminster Bridge seven or eight months ago, — it's too long a story to tell now, — and was taken to a surgeon's close in the neighbourhood where the accident occurred, and ever since then I have lost all trace of him. But don't let us wait to chatter. You cut down to Fleet Lane and make Sal come up shortly. On second thoughts, she had better not come with you, or yet take a direct course; and if she should think there is anybody on the watch dogging her steps, then she mustn't come here at all, but must go quite in another direction, so as to put them off their scent. Now, then, Bill, do you understand, and will you manage this thing cleverly, as you know how to do it if you like?"

"I will, Dan'el," returned the chandler; and he forthwith took his departure.

An hour elapsed, during which the Hangman experienced the most feverish anxiety, which was moreover artificially stimulated by the deep inroads he made upon Taggarty's gin-bottle. He frequently gnashed his teeth with rage, or

clenched his fist and struck it forcibly upon the table. Often, too, during that hour, did he go and listen at the street door to hear if footsteps were approaching. The clock of Clerkenwell Church proclaimed one, and still Taggarty did not return. What could be keeping him? If he went quick, he need not be more than ten minutes going, and the like time for coming back, which would leave him forty minutes to stop and talk in Fleet Lane. Surely, then, he ought to be back by this time. Was Taggarty capable of betraying him? No, the Hangman rejected that idea. Why, then, did he not return?

At length, about ten minutes past one, the chandler made his appearance. His looks were haggard and frightened, and Coffin at once saw that he had obtained some evil intelligence.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, in a voice expressive of the most poignant impatience.

"There's a terrible smash," was Taggarty's reply. "Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker are all three arrested, and the officers have been to Fleet Lane —"

"Malediction!" ejaculated the Hangman, in a low but terrible voice of concentrated rage. "What else, Bill? Go on, tell me everything."

"It appears that the Buttoner has peached and all particulars about Nell Gibson is known. You had better be off, Dan'el, as quick as ever you can. Sally will meet you in two hours down at old Jeremy Humpage's in Whitechapel."

"What on earth made her fix upon that place?" cried the Hangman. "She ought to know very well that old Jeremy won't open his house at such a time of night, or, rather, in the morning; and that even if it was the middle of the day, he wouldn't like to receive a visit from me when I am in trouble. It would be all very well if I had a lot of things to dispose of, plate or jewelry, or what not."

"Well, but Sally says you must make the old man let you in, and nobody will think of looking for you there. You couldn't go to Joe Parkes's, on Saffron Hill, close by here, nor yet to Meg Blowen's, in the Almonry. Sharp Mawley's in the Mint is done up, and Polly Scratchem, in Whitechapel, is no friend of yourn. So Sally was bewildered, and thought it best for you to go at once to old Jeremy's."

"Well, and I don't know but what, after all, it's the best

dodge," observed the Hangman. "But what the deuce made you so long?"

"Why, Sally had gone over to Jacob's Island to give you a hint that Larry's men had been to Fleet Lane, and she hadn't come back when I called. So Dick begged me to wait, and I did. But pray don't delay any longer. I might have been followed, for anything I know, though I don't think I was, for I kept a sharp lookout as I came along."

The Hangman tossed off another glass of gin and water, to cheer his spirits, as he said, and then, having thanked Taggarty for his kindness, took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OLD FENCE'S ABODE

In one of the narrowest, dirtiest, and most pestilential streets of that maze of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization known as Whitechapel, the habitation of Jeremy Humpage was situated. It consisted of two houses thrown into one, for the old man ostensibly carried on the business of second-hand clothes dealer, but his real occupation was that of receiver of stolen goods. Indeed, as set forth in an early part of this narrative, he was an inveterate "fence," but he generally managed matters so cunningly as to escape the meshes of the law.

His profits were immense, and he had correspondents upon the Continent by whose aid he carried on a considerable portion of his illicit commerce. For instance, when a robbery of bank-notes for large amounts was accomplished, and payment of them was stopped at the Bank of England, Humpage would purchase them of the thieves, and the instant they fell into his possession he would despatch them to his correspondents in Holland or France, where they were immediately passed into circulation. Or again, if diamonds or other precious stones of very large value came into his possession, these were also sent off to the Continent, where they were readily disposed of. Nor was this all the service which his foreign correspondents rendered him; but inasmuch as he purchased his goods at one-twentieth part of their real value, he was enabled to make constant shipments of large quantities of articles, the impost of Continental tariffs still leaving him a very large margin for profit.

The reader will therefore understand how it was that Mr. Jeremy Humpage required a somewhat large establish-

ment, and he had several persons in his employment. But these individuals did not dwell in his habitation. His old housekeeper, a woman nearly of his own age, was the only individual who slept on the premises besides himself.

On the particular night, however, of which we are writing, Jeremy Humpage had a friend with him. This was his agent and accomplice, the Swag Chovey Bloak, another "fence" whose acquaintance the reader may remember to have made at Bencull's crib the first time that it was introduced to his notice.

It was now past two o'clock in the morning, the Sabbath morning, too, and the Swag Chovey Bloak was still closeted with Jeremy Humpage in a back room of the establishment in Whitechapel. But of very peculiar construction and arrangements was this back room. The window was entirely boarded up, with merely two circular holes about four inches in diameter toward the top, for the purpose of letting in the fresh air. The door of this room fitted so exactly into the wainscoted passage whence it opened, and was so minutely uniform with the other part of the woodwork, that not even the keenest observer would have noticed, when in the passage, that it was a door at all. No hinges were visible, no crevices nor creases which might trace the outline of a door, nor was there any handle, latch, or lock to be seen. The hinges were invisible, and the door opened by means of a secret spring. The interior of the room showed a floor, walls, and ceiling blackened with smoke. There was a large furnace, with a melting-pot fixed over a grating to which a pair of bellows were so adjusted as to enable any one standing by to sustain an incessant fanning of the fire under that grating. A table and three or four chairs constituted the furniture.

In this room it was that, at two o'clock on the Sunday morning, we now find old Jeremy Humpage and his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak. There was wine upon the table, and not only wine, but also a tray containing the materials for an excellent repast, as well as two or three dishes of the summer fruits then in season. For old Jeremy was regaling himself and his friend on the strength of a most lucrative transaction which they had concluded a few hours back. This was nothing more nor less than a purchase of a large quantity of plate that had been stolen from some rich per-

son's house, and as initials and armorial bearings were engraven on every article of the plunder, the melting-pot was gradually fusing the whole into a solid mass.

Jeremy and his friend were chatting gaily, drinking their wine, as they watched the melting process, and taking it by turns to work the bellows. Suddenly a sharp ring was heard at the street door. By the light of the candles, as well as by that of the candescent charcoal under the melting-pot, the two fences gazed upon each other with troubled looks, for notwithstanding the admirable precautions taken to conceal the laboratory where their operations were going on, their consciences were not sufficiently pure to guarantee them against the sudden alarm which this imperious ringing at such an hour was so well calculated to excite.

The old housekeeper had for some hours past been in bed; but even if she were up, she would not have been permitted to open the door at that time of night, or, rather, morning. Old Jeremy therefore rose from his seat, took one of the candles, and issuing forth from the room, carefully closed the mysterious door behind him. Descending the stairs, he drew back the bolts of the front door, but left the chain still up, so that when open to the width of a foot it was still safely secured against any intruder.

"Let me in, Mr. Jeremy, let me in," said a female voice. "I wish to speak to you particularly."

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Don't you know me, Sally Melmoth?" was the response.

"Ah! Daniel Coffin's friend. But what do you want?"

"I cannot speak here, and it is important. Let me in."

Jeremy Humpage hesitated no longer, but letting go the chain, gave the woman admittance. Then closing the door, he replaced the chain and shot the bolts back into their sockets. Having done this, he led the way into a little parlour on the ground floor, and, placing the light upon the table, awaited the explanation which the woman had to give for this unseasonable visit.

"Mr. Humpage, pray don't be angry with me," she began, "but I am in very great trouble."

"Trouble!" he immediately ejaculated, trembling all over, "then what on earth do you come to me for? You know very well that I can't help you. But what sort of trouble is it? Something about Daniel Coffin, I suppose.

Why, that man was born to get into trouble. What chances, what opportunities he has had! What business we have done together! And yet, somehow or other, he is always running into scrapes."

"But since you have done so much business with him," observed Sally Melmoth, "won't you give him your advice? To tell you the truth, relying on your friendship, I have made an appointment for him to come and meet me here."

"Come here?" actually screamed the old man, his shrivelled form shaking from head to foot, and continuing to tremble, as if with the palsy, while he went on to say, in a sharp, querulous tone, "What an hour to make an appointment at a person's house! I won't have it, I can't have it."

"But it is done, the appointment is made," said Sally Melmoth, "and it's too late to alter it. I must wait for him here."

"When will he come? When will he come?" asked the old man, nervously.

"In about half an hour or so," was the response. "I walked quicker than usual, and therefore got here sooner than I expected. Come, Mr. Jeremy, pray don't look so cross about it. We shall do you no harm, and surely Daniel has put enough things in your way at different times to induce you to show him this little civility."

"Well, well, I don't know but what you say is true enough," observed the ancient fence, somewhat softened. "But it must be a very bad case indeed for Daniel to make his appointments here. It shows as if all his usual haunts and wonted cribs had become too hot to hold him. Come, tell me frankly, Sal, what is the matter?"

"Why, you know Nell Gibson?"

"Ah! she disappeared in a strange way some time ago. What about her?"

"It's just for that disappearance that Daniel's in trouble," answered Sal, "and moreover, there's a precious break-up down at the Folly Bridges."

"At Bencull's?" asked the old man.

"Yes. But hark! there's Daniel!" she exclaimed, as the bell rang.

Old Humpage took up the light and went to open the door. In less than a minute he returned to the parlour, followed

by the Hangman, whose grim countenance expanded into a sort of smile of satisfaction on beholding Sally Melmoth, for he was just now in that desperate situation when such a proof of fidelity on her part was calculated to touch his stony heart.

"Now you can talk over matters together," said Jeremy, "and I will come back to you in half an hour."

"Very good," said the Hangman; and when the old fence had quitted the room, he drew his chair close up to Sally Melmoth, saying, "Now, tell me all about it."

"I don't know how it was," began the woman, "but when Bencull sent up for you this evening I thought there was something wrong, and I was very dull and miserable after you went out. It was half-past seven when you left, and Dick was gone out. So there I was left all alone, to mope by myself, till the blues came over me. At about ten Dick came back, and finding me so miserable, he would make me take some spirits. Well, he and I were just sitting down to a comfortable glass, when a knock was heard at the door, and on Dick's opening it, in walked three of Mr. Sampson's men. Of course they wouldn't believe us when we declared that you wasn't in, and they searched the whole place. We asked what was the matter, but they would not tell us; they were as mum as mice. At length, being satisfied that you was not there, they went away. As soon as they were gone and I thought the coast was clear, I stole out and cut across to the Folly Bridges as quick as my legs would carry me. But when I got down to Bencull's, the place was all shut up and no light to be seen. Three or four groups of people were, however, talking together in low whispers in Mill Street, and I went up to one party and asked what was the matter. Then they told me that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with a lot of his men, had suddenly invaded Bencull's house, some getting in by the gallery behind, and others bursting open the street door. They took Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker prisoners, and hurried them away. But one of the constables, who, it seems, had watched in the street while the capture was being made, told the inhabitants who came out of the neighbouring houses that it was on account of the murder of a gal named Nell Gibson, and that one of the chaps engaged in it had peached. I likewise heard the people say that Daniel

Coffin was in it, and that the officers were looking after him."

"That scoundrel the Buttoner!" growled the Hangman, in a low tone of condensed ferocity. "By Satan! I wouldn't mind swinging if I could only be revenged on him."

"Oh, don't talk in that horrid manner, Daniel!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, crying.

"Well, go on," he observed. "What did you do next?"

"I hastened back from the Folly Bridges as quick as ever I could to Fleet Lane," she continued, wiping her eyes, "and there I found Taggarty. I didn't know where to make an appointment to meet you, but I thought that this place would be the best, and I'll tell you why. Because," continued the young woman, "Larry Sampson knows very well how prudent and cautious and particular in all his doings old Jeremy is, and he would no more think of looking for you beneath this roof than in the king's palace. There will be a precious hue and cry to-morrow, or, rather, presently, for the new day has begun already some time, and you must lay up in lavender as close as ever you can till the storm has so far blown over that you can get away to France."

"What, then, do you propose? That I should stay here for awhile?" asked the Hangman, evidently well pleased with the suggestion. "But old Jeremy won't allow it."

"Nonsense, Daniel! How can he prevent it?" exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "You tell him you must stay here for a day or two, and then when once he is implicated in concealing you at all, even for a few hours, he won't dare turn around upon you, because he would be getting himself into trouble for having harboured you. Besides, a miserable, timid old man like him, that you can blow out of existence with a breath, won't dare oppose your will. So you can force yourself upon him, and he must do his best to conceal you."

"Trust a woman for ready wit and invention!" exclaimed the Hangman. "You argue like a philosopher, Sal, and your advice shall be adopted. But I say, are you sure that you wasn't followed, coming up here just now?"

"I am sure of it," answered Sally, —"at least as sure as a person well could be in such a case. But tell me, is there anything you want done?"

"Nothing particular at present. You had better not come near me again for some days, 'cause why, a watch is

sure to be set upon your movements. If I want to communicate with you, it shall be through old Humpage. So now you understand; and if Larry Sampson or any of his people call, mind you pretend that you haven't the slightest idea where the deuce I can be."

"Trust me for that," answered Sally Melmoth.

Jeremy Humpage now returned to the room, saying, "Well, my good friends, have you had your little talk out? I suppose you are ready to go now, for I must think of retiring to bed."

"I tell you what it is, friend Humpage," responded the Hangman, "I am going to sponge on your kindness till night comes on again."

"What! stay here?" screamed the old man. "Impossible! impossible!" and he shivered from head to foot.

"Now, come, don't be inhospitable," said the Hangman, soothingly. "If you was in trouble, and came to Fleet Lane, saying, 'My dear Mr. Coffin, I rely upon your courtesy and friendship,' or some suchlike gentlemanly terms, you would receive a noble reception. So I expect the same from you."

"But, my good friend," remonstrated Jeremy, "you know that I never mix myself up in the concerns of others; and this too," he added, with a visible shudder, "is so very, very serious."

"Come, don't you pretend to be a saint," interrupted the Hangman, with a return of his wonted gruffness of manner. "That dodge won't do. What the devil are you thinking of? To turn me out here at three o'clock in the morning, just when it is getting light? Why, I should be grabbed up directly."

"Well," observed Humpage, liking the present adventure as little as might be, "if it's only the matter of a few hours, of course I cannot be so cruel as to refuse. But on the positive understanding that when night comes again —"

"To be sure! I shall only be too glad to be safe off," cried the Hangman; but he darted a significant look at Sally Melmoth, as much as to say that now he was once safely installed beneath the old man's roof, he should not take his departure until it fully suited his convenience.

To be brief, Sally bade her paramour farewell, and issued forth on her way back to Fleet Lane. Old Jeremy then conducted the Hangman to a bedroom, and having seen

him commence his preparations for retiring to rest, he went back to the laboratory in order to rejoin his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak.

As soon as the Hangman found himself alone, he stopped in the midst of taking off his garments, and sitting down upon the truckle-bedstead in the sordid little chamber to which he had been conducted, began meditating very seriously upon the circumstances of his position. His guilty conscience was naturally prone to conjure up a thousand terrors akin to those which had arisen in his mind while alone at Taggarty's, but which had been allayed, or, at all events, temporarily absorbed, by the excitement of the walk from Mutton Hill to Whitechapel, and also so long as he was in the society of his mistress, Sally Melmoth. But now that he was plunged into the solitude of this miserable chamber, without a soul to speak to, and without even a drop of spirits to give him an artificial stimulant, he rapidly fell into despondency, and a myriad phantoms of evil rose up in his active imagination.

What if Sally Melmoth was to betray him? She had hitherto been faithful to him for some years and through many vicissitudes; but he had frequently made her the victim of his brutality, and when anything thwarted him, had vented his spite upon her. Then her brother Dick, too, had also been compelled to put up with his coarse invectives, and even with his blows; and being of so treacherous and vindictive a character himself, the Hangman naturally dreaded to find treachery and revenge in others. He had a considerable sum of money concealed at his house in Fleet Lane, and though he had ever most studiously avoided giving any hint either to his mistress or her brother of this circumstance, yet they must know that he had money, the proceeds of the many desperate but lucrative matters in which he had been engaged, and what if they were, under present circumstances, to institute a search for it, now that he was compelled to absent himself from his dwelling?

These reflections began to torture the Hangman most poignantly, most goadingly, and in the solitude of that little chamber, he clenched his fist and gnashed his teeth with rage. Then he endeavoured to console himself, as men will do in such cases, by conjuring up every argument he could possibly think of in favour of the fidelity of Sally Melmoth

and her brother. On former occasions when he had been in trouble, were they not always faithful? And on this present occasion had not Sally Melmoth done her best to seek him out at Jacob's Island and give him timely warning? And had she not wept, too, just now in his presence? Ah! all that was well and good, but the Hangman felt that he also would play the hypocrite where he meant to become the traitor, and that he would lull into a false security any individual whom he intended to make a victim.

Now that his fears were so terribly active, they speedily took a wider range, and he thought to himself that even if Sally Melmoth and her brother Dick should prove faithful, what guarantee had he for similar fidelity on the part of Jeremy Humpage?

"The old villain," said the Hangman to himself, "knows that it is all up with me now, so far as continuing in London is concerned. He is aware that I can never be of any service to him again, and that I shall bring nothing more to his melting-pot. Then, what regard can he have for me? Everybody knows that these cursed old fences are the most treacherous scoundrels in existence, and often send their pals, when completely done up and no longer useful, to the scaffold, just as a landowner sends his worn-out labourers to the workhouse. Besides, when I come to think of it, what possible fear can old Jeremy stand in of me? If he gave me up to justice and I was to turn around upon him, denouncing him as an old fence, I should only be telling what Larry Sampson and every constable in London know very well already. But the proof, ay, the proof, that's it. For to show that he is a receiver of stolen goods, something that has been stolen must be found on his premises. Of course old Jeremy knows all this, and is well aware that he is not in my power. He is too wide awake to be in the power of anybody. Then why shouldn't he give me up? He is endangering himself by letting me stay here. This really would put him in the reach of the law. There's another thing, too. Perhaps old Jeremy wouldn't mind propitiating Larry Sampson by such an important service as handing me over to his keeping. Yes, by Satan! I am surrounded by dangers. In fact, I feel as if my case was desperate; it's a sort of crisis, I know it is, I am sure of it. Was there ever a fellow who had done such things as I have that didn't get

sold by his friends at last, either by his mistress or his pals? And there is Bill Taggarty, too, he knows that I am here, and he is such a miserable, sneaking coward that if it was known I had been to his place at all, and Larry Sampson went and questioned him about it, he is just as likely as not to let the cat out of the bag at once and send Larry down here to look for me. Malediction! I can't stay here, and yet where the deuce am I to go, with scarcely any money in my pocket?"

From these reflections which the Hangman made to himself, the reader will comprehend the troubled state of his mind. It was therefore utterly impossible that he could lie down quietly and think of composing himself to rest. He suffered no remorse on account of his crimes, no, not even for that blackest one of all, the consequences of which had gathered the present storm over his head. But if he knew not the compunction of his tremendous guilt, he at all events experienced its terrors, and now was he chafing in that little chamber like a wounded lion in its den.

Suddenly an idea struck him, an idea which was but too consonant with the desperate character of this fiend in human shape. What if he were to lay violent hands upon Humpage, ransack the old man's coffers, take possession of everything in the shape of money or valuables which he could find, disguise himself in some of the clothing from the establishment's ample store, and then sally forth, even in the broad daylight, in the hope of escaping safe and sound out of the metropolis? For it was broad daylight now.

This plan the public executioner speedily fixed upon, but ere he stole forth from his chamber, he lingered to settle beforehand the mode of procedure. He knew that the old housekeeper was ordinarily the only inmate of the dwelling besides Humpage himself, and he thought it would be better to dispose of her first ere he carried his fearful scheme into execution against her master. He had murderous weapons about him, more than sufficient to enable him to overcome a decrepit old woman and an aged man, even if he found them both awake in their respective chambers and they were to offer resistance; he had his crowbar, his clasp-knife, and his pistols. But the puzzle was, where were those chambers? How could he find out in which room the housekeeper slept, and in which Jeremy Humpage? If he went

wandering about the dwelling at a venture, he might be seen, his design would be suspected, windows might be thrown up and an alarm raised, before he could possibly silence the two old people for ever. How, then, was he to proceed?

"Trust to the chapter of accidents," said the Hangman to himself, "for I can't very well make my position more desperate than it is, whereas I may contrive to improve it."

The villain! Though now menaced by all the frightful consequences of murder, he hoped to improve his condition by other murders.

The morning, as we have already hinted, had fully dawned, and it was quite light inside his chamber. His countenance had a more than usually horrible appearance. It was ghastly with the terrors that he had so recently been conjuring up, and by the evil passions which were agitating in his mind. This ghastliness was enhanced by the unshorn condition of his beard, which blackened all the lower part of his countenance, while a sinister light, such as that of the reptile, vibrated in his eyes, gleaming from beneath his dark, overhanging brows. Taking the pistols from his pocket, he assured himself that they were loaded, and put fresh priming in the pan of each. Having restored them to his capacious pockets, he took out his clasp-knife, opened it, and tried the point. Then did a grim smile of terrible satisfaction appear upon his features, and as he raised his eyes he caught the reflection of himself in a little mirror suspended to the wall. The man actually started, as if that mirror were a window through which a fiend was looking in upon him, for he never felt, vile as he knew his aspect to be, that it was so utterly diabolical as at that moment.

His plan being settled, his mind made up, and his weapons duly prepared for any emergency, he took off his great clumsy lace-up boots, and opened the door with the noiselessness of an accomplished burglar. The passage with which the chamber communicated was lighted by a window at the end, and Coffin perceived that four doors opened from it, of which that of his own chamber was one. A dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling, or, at least, no sound of any kind met his ears. Stealing out into the passage, the Hangman tried the door of the chamber adjoining his own. It opened, he looked in, but no one was there. It at

once struck him that this must be old Humpage's room, for there were several articles of clothing lying about, evidently belonging to him. But the bed had not been slept in all night. Perhaps the old man had for some reason sought another chamber, and yet the executioner could not exactly settle his mind to this belief, for his keen eye caught sight of a nightshirt and cotton nightcap lying at the foot of the bed, as if in readiness for their owner's use. Without, however, pausing to reflect much longer upon the matter, Coffin was about to issue forth and examine the other chambers, when his acute ear suddenly caught the sounds of footsteps advancing, as if with tiptoe caution, along the passage. Not a moment did he deliberate how to act, but at once concealed himself under the bed, for he thought it best to ascertain if possible who were about the house at that hour, ere he made any attempt in pursuance of his murderous purpose.

Scarcely was he ensconced underneath the bed when the door, which he had left ajar, was opened, and two persons (as he judged by their footsteps) entered the room. Still as death he lay in his place of concealment, and when the two individuals who had thus entered began to converse, although it was in low whispers, he nevertheless had not the slightest difficulty in recognizing the voices of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HANGMAN'S PROCEEDINGS

It appeared to the public executioner that he heard one of the individuals put a key in a lock and open a door which grated on its hinges. His supposition was correct. It was Jeremy Humpage opening an iron safe, which was let into the wall of his bedchamber.

"Well, my dear friend," said the old man, in his nervous, trembling voice, "since we have agreed upon the value of the swag, all I have got to do is to give you your share. Thirds, you know, you take thirds in these matters."

"That's right enough," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, "as a general rule, but —"

"Dear me, my worthy and excellent friend," interrupted old Jeremy, "pray don't look discontented. You can't conceive how I hate the word 'but.' Besides, I thought just now, before we left the secret room, that you were quite contented to take your usual share of the value of all that plate?"

"Well, but this job is different from the rest," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a tone of remonstrance. "Recollect —"

"Hush, hush, my dear friend!" said Jeremy Humpage. "Bear in mind, I told you that scoundrel Coffin is in the next room to this, and as he mightn't be asleep, it is possible he may hear us. Speak low, therefore, speak low. He's deuced suspicious."

"Well," resumed the other fence, "as I was going to observe, you should recollect that this is the largest and best business I have ever put in your way yet, long as we have been connected together. Here's a matter of at least four hundred pound worth of plate that you gave sixty pound

for; and now that it's all gone nice and comfortable through the melting-pot, and you are safe to sell the lump of silver in Holland for three hundred pound — "

" Granted, granted! " interrupted old Jeremy, with some little degree of impatience. " So, deducting the sixty that I gave for it, we will reckon the gain to be two hundred and forty, the third of which is exactly eighty pounds, and that is what I am going to give you — "

" You ought to make it a hundred, a cool hundred," interrupted the Swag Chovey Bloak, " and then I shall be quite satisfied."

" Say ninety, and it shall be a bargain," whispered old Humpage, his words hissing like a hideous reptile. " Only think, my dear friend, ninety pounds in good gold and bank-notes! And you to have it all at once, while I have got to wait till my agent Bekerlynck at The Hague disposes of the lump of silver and remits me the proceeds."

" Well, come, we won't stand haggling here," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a somewhat surly tone. " The morning is advancing, and, besides, you know where I have got to go and what I have got to do."

" Yes, yes," observed Jeremy Humpage, in a chuckling manner, although he still continued to speak in a low whisper. " We must say another word or two upon that. But first of all, take your money. Here's six tens, that's sixty; here's a twenty, that's eighty; and here's ten good gold sovereigns as ever were coined. Look at it all, — ninety pounds! Isn't it a sum to part with? But now put it up safe in your pocket, and just take a towel and smear your face. It's rather blackened by bending over the furnace for so many hours."

Here the Hangman heard the sounds of a basin and jug rattling and water pouring out, so that he had no difficulty in understanding, in his place of concealment, that the Swag Chovey Bloak had followed old Jeremy's advice and was performing his ablutions. Meanwhile Daniel Coffin thought to himself, " It's a precious piece of good luck that put me in the way of finding out where old Jeremy's iron safe is, and also gave me a hint about the lump of silver these rascals have been talking of. But I will be bound to say that instead of Mr. Jeremy Humpage sending it over to Mynheer Bekerlynck of The Hague to sell for him, it's Mr.

Daniel Coffin that will call in person upon the said Mynheer Bekerlynck and get him to dispose of the said lump of silver then and there."

By the time the Hangman had made an end of his reflections, the Swag Chovey Bloak had likewise finished his ablutions, Jeremy Humpage having in the interval relocked the iron safe.

" Now what is it that you have got to say to me about that there scoundrel? " asked the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a cautious whisper. " Have you made up your mind about him? "

" To be sure, to be sure! " was the response, given in a low but quaking, quivering tone, as if the old man had resolved upon the performance of something which he nevertheless trembled to think of. " Larry Sampson and his people are sure, somehow or another, to trace the fellow to my house, and what will become of me if I am caught harbouring a murderer? There will be a hue and cry presently, handbills printed, placards posted, and perhaps rewards offered, so that when once all this is done I can't possibly pretend to remain ignorant of the fellow's crime any longer. Besides, why should he be here at all, if not to conceal himself from pursuit? And therefore you see, my worthy friend, that if I do continue to harbour him I shall be taken up as an accessory after the fact. This will never, never do."

" To be sure not," responded the Swag Chovey Bloak, " and therefore, all things considered, you do well to give him up. So, as there is no time to be lost, I will just trudge along to Larry Sampson's and give him the proper information."

" But mind you tell him I sent you, mind you don't forget that," urged old Jeremy. " It's of the highest importance."

" Don't be afraid; I sha'n't forget it," returned the other fence. " In less than a couple of hours you may rely upon seeing Larry down here with a lot of his people. But I say, by the bye," added the Swag Chovey Bloak, " there is no chance of his searching your premises, is there? "

" Who search the premises? " asked old Jeremy.

" Why, Larry Sampson, to be sure," was the response. " Coming to arrest a murderer, don't you think he may take it into his head to have a look all over the house? "

" And if he did," interrupted old Jeremy Humpage, " you

don't think for a moment that with all his keen scent and eagle eyes Larry Sampson could find the secret door in the passage overhead? No, no; it's a precious deal too well hidden. Doesn't it fit into the wainscot just as if it wasn't a door at all? And who would think for a moment, when visiting the two chambers on the right hand in that passage, that there was another room lying between them? No, no, my excellent friend, there is not the slightest chance of Larry poking his nose into the secret crib there and finding the lump of silver in the melting-pot. Besides," added old Jeremy, in a more serious tone, for he had been chuckling with a sort of triumphant garrulity while previously speaking, " there will be no searching of the premises at all. To search one's premises is to treat one as an accomplice of the criminal who is arrested, but as it's me myself that sends up the information, through you, to Larry Sampson, he can't possibly treat me as an accomplice."

" Well, well, you know best," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak, " and if you are satisfied, I am sure I am. For my part, I sha'n't be at all sorry to see the Hangman hung up himself. I never liked him. Besides, he's done for now, and useless to us. He will never put no more things in our way, and therefore the sooner he's got rid of the better."

" Yes, yes, that's exactly my opinion," said Humpage. " And now let's waste no more time in words, but you be off at once to Larry Sampson's."

" I shall go straight there," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak. " It's now half-past three o'clock. By half-past five, at latest, Larry and his men will be down here. I suppose you will sit up for them."

" Yes, yes," responded Humpage, in a shaking, quivering whisper. " I am in no humour to sleep, not a bit of it. So, when you are gone, I shall wait with anxiety till Sampson and the runners come."

" Now, then, I will be off." And with these words, the Swag Chovey Bloak moved upon tiptoe toward the door of the chamber, followed by old Humpage, who went to let him out of the house.

When they had issued from the room, Daniel Coffin lay still underneath the bed until the sounds of their retreating footsteps were no longer audible, and then he crept forth from his hiding-place. The expression of his countenance

was even more diabolic than when he had been startled by catching the reflection of his features in the looking-glass. With all the concentrated rage of a fiend, he was panting for revenge. His worst fears were confirmed, Humpage meant to betray him, and now he actually yearned to imbrue his hands in the old man's blood.

"In two hours Larry Sampson and his men will be here, eh?" he muttered to himself. "But by that time I shall be far away. Two hours, indeed! Ten minutes are now enough for the work that I have got to do. I am almost sorry I let that old scoundrel, the Swag Chovey Bloak, get off so easy, but it wouldn't have done to reveal myself from under the bed. At the first appearance of my precious countenance peeping forth, they would have raised an alarm before I could have knocked either of them on the head, the old housekeeper would have heard their cries, and the game would have been up with me. But as it is, I am right enough now."

Such were the Hangman's musings as he concealed himself behind one of the bed-curtains. He felt pretty well assured that old Jeremy Humpage would return to his chamber, either to lie down and rest, or else to wash himself, for it was quite evident that he had been up all night in company with the Swag Chovey Bloak, and engaged in the pleasing occupation of melting down four hundred pounds' worth of silver plate.

The Hangman's conjecture was correct relative to the return of old Jeremy Humpage to the chamber, so soon as he had shown his brother fence out of the house. Still and motionless as a statue behind the curtain, Daniel Coffin listened with breathless attention, and in the course of a few minutes he heard the old man's stealthy steps approaching along the passage.

"He walks as if he was treading on eggs," said the Hangman to himself. "That's because he's afraid of disturbing me, but I think it's a deuced deal more likely that I shall disturb him in a minute or two."

As the monster thus mused internally, he drew forth his terrible clasp-knife, and opened the blade, which, by means of a spring or catch, remained fixed, rendering the weapon as serviceably formidable as a stiletto.

Jeremy Humpage entered the chamber very noiselessly,

shut the door, and locked it. He then approached the washing-stand, threw off his coat, and prepared to commence his ablutions. From behind the curtain Daniel Coffin watched his movements, and presently he beheld the old man bend over the basin to bathe his face with a sponge. Now was the moment! Grasping his dagger-knife firmly in his right hand, the Hangman slipped from behind the curtain, one stride took him within reach of his victim, and then, with a tremendous blow, the stiletto was driven deep down between the old man's shoulders. A cry, but not a loud one, burst from the lips of Jeremy Humpage, and he rolled down upon the floor, a corpse.

The murderer, without the slightest remorse for the crime he had just committed, proceeded to rifle the pockets of his victim, and thence he took what money they contained, as well as a bunch of keys.

One of these fitted the safe, in which the Hangman found gold and bank-notes to the amount of about five hundred pounds, as nearly as he could guess at the quick glance he threw over the treasure. But he had no time to waste, for he did not fail to recollect that the Swag Chovey Bloak was on his way to Larry Sampson's.

Having secured the gold and notes about his person, the Hangman was on the point of retreating from the room when he suddenly recollected that his clasp-knife might prove serviceable in case of any danger he should have to encounter elsewhere. He accordingly drew it forth from the body of his victim, wiped it upon a towel, closed the blade, and put it into his pocket. He then unlocked the door, and was issuing forth from the chamber when, in the passage, he found himself face to face with the old housekeeper, who, knowing that her master had purposed to sit up all night, had risen and dressed herself to get him some breakfast.

The woman, although she knew Daniel Coffin well, and was aware that he transacted business with Humpage, was nevertheless amazed and terrified to behold him there at such an hour, especially as he was stealing forth from old Jeremy's chamber, for she was not aware that he had arrived at the house at all, and that he had been admitted by her master himself while she slept. Besides, his looks were now so full of a diabolic expression that his aspect alone at

this moment, apart from all other circumstances, would have been enough to terrify her. A scream thrilled from her lips, but even while it was yet vibrating upon the air, the Hangman sprang at her with the force and fury of a wild beast, clutched her by the throat, stifled all further power of utterance, and flinging her upon the floor of the passage, placed his knee upon her chest. In this manner he held her tight until she grew black in the face, her features became convulsed and livid, and she was suffocated.

Even after her body had ceased to writhe and convulse, and when there was every evidence that the vital spark had fled, the ferocious Hangman still kept his hands upon her neck, the fingers literally digging deep down into her flesh, so as to assure himself that she was indeed no more. Then he rose up, and without loss of time ascended the stairs to the passage above. That the secret room, where the lump of silver was contained, lay between the two chambers on the right hand side of that passage, he had gleaned from the conversation of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak. It was therefore by no means difficult to ascertain exactly where the laboratory was situated, but the puzzling part of the business was to discover how to open the door. The Hangman rapped with his knuckles upon all parts of the wainscot where he conceived that this door ought to be, but he could not tell by the sound where it was. Five minutes were thus lost, and he grew impatient. Still he made another trial, curbing his feelings as well as he was able, and continuing his investigation with all possible carefulness, but another five minutes passed without any better success. Now he grew fearfully impatient, terribly exasperated. Time was so precious to him!

Already had near half an hour elapsed since the departure of the Swag Chovey Bloak, and there was not a minute to waste unnecessarily. What should he do? He would procure a hatchet and break down the whole of the wainscoting in that part of the passage, so as to find the door. But what if there were no hatchet to be found? And nothing else would serve his purpose, for the woodwork was evidently very thick and solid, the better to conceal the existence of the secret door. He must curb his impatience once more, and give another trial. That there was some secret spring he felt convinced, and this must be felt for. Still more care-

fully than hitherto did he renew his investigation, and, ah! this time he is successful. He has touched something, he scarcely knows what, he does not pause to look. It is sufficient for him that the door suddenly flies open, and, with an exclamation of delight, he rushes into the laboratory.

But as he thus springs across the threshold, the door shuts of its own accord behind him.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CORPSE — THE SECRET CHAMBER

We must now go back for a few hours, in order to give some necessary explanations. The Buttoner, as the reader may already have understood, was indeed profoundly stricken with remorse for the share he had taken in the murder of Nell Gibson. Since the perpetration of that crime, many months back, he had become altogether an altered being, abandoning his old companions, wandering about the country, desolate and miserable, like a lost and starved dog, and not having even the spirit to follow his wonted avocations of thimble-rigging in order to procure his bread. The image of Nell Gibson never ceased to haunt him. It followed him about by day, it stood by him at night, wherever he lay down to rest. At length, so terrible became his thoughts, so deep his compunction, that he grew reckless of life; and in process of time the whispering of conscience suggested that the only means of procuring peace for his soul was to make an atonement by a full confession to the proper authorities.

In this mood had he returned to London, at the time of which we have been speaking in preceding chapters; and instinctively bending his way toward Mrs. Young's abode, the place where he had last dwelt in company with Nell Gibson, he chanced to meet old Mother Franklin in the immediate vicinage. To her he at once revealed the fate of the young woman, the remorse that he had experienced, and the determination to which he had come. It was while thus discoursing that they had been noticed and partially overheard by Bencull, as the reader has already seen. Fearing, therefore, that some suspicion of his intent might have been excited in the mind of that man, the Buttoner resolved

to lose no time in executing his project of atonement. He had accordingly proceeded at once, with old Mother Franklin, to Mrs. Young's abode, and to this woman did he repeat all that he had just been saying to Mother Franklin. Mrs. Young, fearful of being considered an accessory to the crime if she were to conceal her knowledge of it, now that in all its particulars it was fully made known to her, urged the Buttoner to accompany her without delay to Larry Sampson's house in Long Acre, and thither did they accordingly proceed together. On arriving at the officer's dwelling, they learned that he was not at home, but would return shortly. Mrs. Young thereupon asked Dame Margery, Mr. Sampson's housekeeper, to furnish them with writing materials, and this being done, Mrs. Young penned a hasty but explicit narrative, containing the requisite particulars, and also a statement to the effect that the Buttoner would remain at her house, ready to surrender himself up whenever Sampson might choose to come and fetch him. To this document she made the Buttoner append his name, and having sealed it, she left it with Dame Margery, to be given to Mr. Sampson the instant he should return home.

This being done, the Buttoner felt somewhat more easy in his mind; and as he accompanied Mrs. Young back to her abode at Bermondsey, he did not once appear to regret the step he had taken. On reaching the house, Mother Franklin, as already described, hurried out into the passage to give them the whispered intimation that Daniel Coffin was in the parlour, and that he evidently suspected what was going on. Therefore was it that when the Hangman endeavoured to escape abruptly from the place, the Buttoner opposed his departure, and then followed the conflict in the passage which we have already described. The public executioner managed to get clear off, but before he thus fled, he committed sad havoc amongst his assailants. Old Mother Franklin was so severely trampled under his feet that she was subsequently carried, in a dying state, up to the attic which she occupied; and the Buttoner had received so severe a blow on the head from the iron heel of Daniel Coffin's great thick boot that he also was left in a very dangerous predicament. Mrs. Young had an arm broken by the poker which she herself had first taken as a weapon of attack, but which the Hangman had wrenched from her hands. Two of the frail

young women dwelling in her house likewise had bones broken, and a third daughter of crime was most severely injured, all by the random blows which Daniel Coffin had struck with the formidable weapon.

Soon afterward Lawrence Sampson and several of his men arrived at the house, and received from the Buttoner's lips a full confirmation of the tale which had been recorded in the document drawn up by Mrs. Young. He had but just strength enough to repeat the particulars, and the surgeon who had been summoned to attend on the wounded at Mrs. Young's house declared that the Buttoner could not be removed for a day or two. A Bow Street runner was accordingly left to keep watch upon him, while Larry Sampson and the rest of his men proceeded to Jacob's Island to arrest Bencull. As the reader has already been informed, the Mushroom Faker and the Durrynacker were captured at the same time with Bencull himself, but the Hangman had evaded the search of the officers of justice.

Soon after it was daylight in the morning, — that same Sabbath morning, be it recollected, which was marked by the horrible crimes of Daniel Coffin at the abode of Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel, — several persons made their appearance with drags at the Folly Bridges to fish for the corpse of the murdered Nell Gibson. This proceeding naturally excited an immense sensation at Jacob's Island, and in a very few minutes after the rumour had circulated for what purpose the men were come, the windows of all the dingy, dilapidated houses overlooking the black ditch on both sides were crowded, even at that early hour, with anxious faces. A glance thrown around upon those countenances so marked with the traces of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization would have afforded a perfect index to the condition of that neighbourhood, as if to the reading of the hidden pages of a volume filled with obscenities, vices, and horrors. The men, however, who had come to drag the dike took no such philosophic view of the scene, but addressed themselves in right good earnest to the loathsome task which they were there to fulfil.

On each of the bridges did two of these men begin to drag, and, at first, innumerable were the rotting remains of cats and dogs that the drags brought up from the thick, slimy ditch. All kinds of filth, offal, and garbage were thus dis-

turbed, and either brought up to the surface or dragged to land, and the effluvium which the troubled dike now exhaled was nauseating to a degree. Yet that was the water, or, rather, the liquid slime, which the inhabitants of Jacob's Island had to drink and to use for all purposes of cookery or ablution, thus imbibing the seeds of disease and death from that fetid, stagnant ditch which served alike as their cistern and their sewer. Such was it at the period of which we are writing, and such is it at the present day. And then, forsooth, we are coolly told, and, what is more, expected to believe, that the poor are cared for by the rich, and that the wretched inmates of squalid hovels, breathing the atmosphere of pestilence and death, are an object of sympathy with the wealthy and the proud ones who roll in their carriages, sleep upon down, dress in fine garments, and eat off plate of silver and of gold.

But to continue our narrative. After having dragged the ditch for some time without any success, the men whom Larry Sampson had sent thither for the purpose began to think that the corpse for which they were seeking must have been carried into the Thames on some occasion when the sluice-gate was open. But the experience of one who was better acquainted than the rest with Jacob's Island suggested that it was far more likely the corpse was deeply embedded in the mud. The men therefore attached weights to their drags, in order to make the hooks sink deep down into the slimy bed of the dike, and the result of this new experiment speedily proved successful. To be brief, the half-decomposed corpse of a female was presently dragged up from the muddy depths, and deposited upon the bridge where the men who experienced this success were stationed. We will not shock the reader by pausing to describe the loathsome appearance which the once handsome and well-formed young woman now presented to the eye. Let it be sufficient to state that the spectacle was so revolting as to fill with horror the minds of even the callous and hardened denizens of Jacob's Island.

The corpse was conveyed into Bencull's now deserted crib, there to await the coroner's inquest which would be holden upon it in due course, and one of the men who had fished up the body was left in charge of it. That is to say, he locked up all the doors of the house and remained watching

outside, for the object was too loathsome in every respect for the individual to stay inside the place along with it.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson rose very early on this same morning, for he was resolved to adopt all possible measures for the arrest of Daniel Coffin. Scarcely had the officer dressed himself and taken a mouthful of breakfast, when he received intelligence that the corpse of the murdered woman had been found, and very soon afterward, the Swag Chovey Bloak called to inform him that the Hangman was at Jeremy's Humpage's house. Of course the fence made Sampson understand that old Humpage had not voluntarily secreted the criminal, but that he had forced himself into that asylum. The Bow Street officer accordingly lost no time in repairing with half a dozen of his men to the very midst of that morass of wretchedness and demoralization bearing the name of Whitechapel, and on reaching the street where Humpage's establishment was situated, Larry Sampson disposed of his subordinates in such a manner that they might anticipate any attempt at escape on the part of the Hangman should he take the alarm before his capture could be accomplished. Two men were left to watch in the street; two were sent around to obtain admission into one of the houses the back windows of which overlooked the yard in the rear of Humpage's establishment; and when these dispositions were made, Larry Sampson, attended by his two remaining followers, knocked at the front door of the habitation.

Several minutes elapsed, and the summons received no answer. Sampson now suspected that something was wrong, and, without waiting to repeat that summons, he at once ordered an entry to be effected by breaking open the shutters of one of the windows on the ground floor. This was speedily done, and the officer, with a loaded pistol in his hand, was the first to enter the house, his two comrades following close behind. They were now in one of the spacious warerooms of the establishment, and having assured themselves that no one was concealed in that part of the premises, they forced open the door, which was always carefully locked at night, and thus effected an entry into the passage on the ground floor. All the lower part of the house being searched in vain, they ascended to the first story, and there, in the middle of the passage, they discovered the corpse of

the housekeeper. The old woman was quite dead, and the fearful marks upon her neck, as well as the hideous distortion of her countenance, showed at once by what means her murder had been accomplished. The discovery of old Jeremy's body in the bedchamber followed next, and the open door of the safe proved that robbery had accompanied murder.

That all these crimes were the horrible work of the Hangman there could not be the slightest doubt, and that he had saved himself by flight was naturally conceived. Nevertheless, Larry Sampson instituted the strictest search throughout the establishment; every apartment was entered, save and excepting that secret room which served as the laboratory for the murdered fence.

Without entertaining the slightest suspicion that there was such a place within those walls, Larry Sampson and his two men issued forth again from the house, but in so doing they perceived that the street door was bolted and chained inside. It was therefore clear enough that the Hangman had not quitted the premises by this means of egress, and inasmuch as throughout the search just concluded no open window nor other indication of flight had met the officer's notice, Larry resolved to go over the entire establishment once more. This he did without discovering the slightest clue which to his experienced eye could afford an indication of the course taken by the murderer when he quitted the house. Was it possible that the Hangman had still remained concealed somewhere upon the premises? Sampson scarcely thought it likely, and yet he did not feel justified in abandoning the search as yet.

Leaving the two men who were with him to keep watch inside the house, Larry Sampson proceeded around to that dwelling where two others of his men had obtained admission in order to watch from the back windows, and from that point where they were already posted did Larry Sampson now survey all the back part of Humpage's establishment. His keen eye very soon observed that there was one window on the second story which was boarded up, and painted in such a manner as to have the appearance of being uniform with the dingy brickwork itself, so as to conceal the existence of a window there altogether. Sampson's attention was first drawn to this contrivance by the appearance of two small dark spots which struck him to be intended as air-holes,

and on a more scrutinizing survey he was enabled to trace the outlines of the shutters that blocked up the window. He then studied the exact position of this concealed window in reference to the adjacent ones on the same floor, and with all these facts well arranged in his clear and comprehensive mind, he hastened back again to the scene of the double murder.

On rejoining his two followers whom he had left in charge of the establishment, he told them what he had seen, intimating his suspicion that there was some hidden nook, closet, or chamber in the house which had hitherto escaped their investigation. To the second floor did they accordingly reascend, and proceeded to examine the two chambers between which the laboratory was situated. Now that they were on the right scent, and that their suspicions were directed in the proper channel, it was not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that between the two chambers there was quite sufficient room for a smaller one. Their next step was to examine the woodwork in the passage, but there they discovered no indication of a door. Of course Larry Sampson was not to be baffled. He felt assured that though he perceived not the slightest sign of a door, he was nevertheless standing upon the threshold of an important discovery. He therefore despatched one of his men to fetch the nearest carpenter in the neighbourhood, or, at all events, to borrow a hatchet and the other necessary implements for breaking down the wainscot of the passage.

In about a quarter of an hour the runner returned, accompanied by a carpenter with his basket of tools at his back. The work of demolition then commenced, and in a very few minutes it became apparent enough that there was really a door, most curiously contrived and admirably concealed, in that place. But even before it was completely broken down, and also before the woodwork was perforated in such a way as to afford a glimpse of the interior of the laboratory, the carpenter's hatchet suddenly struck upon the hidden spring, and the door opened of its own accord.

Then did a terrible malediction, accompanied by a ferocious howl like that of a wild beast, burst forth from the interior of the hidden chamber, hidden now no longer, and Larry Sampson coolly observed, " It is he."

The next instant the Hangman, holding a loaded pistol in each hand, and his crowbar between his teeth, sprang forth, as if the same wild beast that had given the savage growl was now desperately turning upon its enemies. One of his weapons, aimed pointblank at Larry Sampson, fortunately flashed in the pan; the other, levelled at the carpenter, missed him by a hair's breadth and lodged its bullet in the wainscot facing the door of the laboratory. Then, ere he had time to make any further attempt at resistance, or to achieve any real mischief, the ruffian, strong in his maddened fury though he were, was seized upon by the two runners and the carpenter, this last-mentioned individual threatening to strike him down with his hatchet if he did not surrender. At the same time Larry Sampson, utterly undismayed by the narrow escape his own life had just experienced, pointed a pistol toward the Hangman's head, saying, with his wonted phlegmatic coolness, "If you resist any further, you are a dead man."

It would be impossible to describe the horrible expression of rage and hate which now fastened, as it were, upon Daniel Coffin's countenance, nor shall we sully our pages by recording the diabolic imprecation which rolled forth in a deep growl from his lips. Perceiving that resistance was indeed futile, he submitted to have the fetters and manacles, wherewith the Bow Street runners were ever provided, fastened upon his limbs, and then, so soon as he felt himself utterly powerless, he sank into a mood of dogged and ferocious sullenness. A hackney-coach was speedily fetched, and the formidable Daniel Coffin was conveyed to a place of security.

One word of explanation relative to a particular incident, ere we conclude this chapter. The reader will remember that when the Hangman had discovered the secret spring, and had rushed with a joy so wildly exultant into the laboratory, the door had closed of its own accord behind him. This circumstance did not at the first moment trouble him at all, nor even attract his notice. His eye had caught sight of the huge lump of silver in the melting-pot, and all his thoughts were concentrated in the task of enveloping the treasure in his handkerchief and securing it about his person. But this done, he suddenly became aware of the horrifying fact that he was a prisoner. Vainly did he

search for the secret spring; he could not find it. Then he attempted to break the door open with his crowbar, but its strength resisted all his endeavours. In short, wearied with ineffectual exertions, and thrown into a terrific fever-heat by his maddened endeavours to break loose, he had sat down to recruit his strength, when it struck him that the best course to adopt was to remain quiet and trust to the place of his concealment remaining undiscovered when the house should be searched. This he did, and the reader has already seen the result.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DESERTED MISTRESS

It was about nine o'clock in the morning, and Penelope Arbuthnot was seated in her own chamber at Windsor Castle, gazing through the open casement upon the beautiful view which the window commanded. The maid of honour — a maid only in name, and not in reality — was loosely apparelled in an elegant morning wrapper. She had not long risen from her couch. Her hair was but negligently gathered up, no advance had been made in her toilet beyond the wonted ablutions, and the wrapper had been so carelessly flung on that it displayed more than it concealed of the lady's voluptuous charms. But then, she was alone, and, moreover, her thoughts were too deeply occupied to allow her to observe the seminudity of her person.

The casement was, as we have said, open, but on the broad ledge an array of flowers formed a beautiful screen to veil Penelope from the look of any one who might have been walking in the grounds upon which the window looked. The breeze, soft, and genial, and warm with the sun of August, fanned her somewhat flushed cheeks, and played with a refreshing influence upon her heated brow; while the flowers, alike in the window and on the parterres of the garden below, loaded the air with a delicious fragrance which was wafted all around her.

We have said upon a former occasion that Penelope was not exactly beautiful, nor could she be called positively handsome, but she was a fine, full-grown young woman, with a figure nobly developed, and endowed with the most voluptuous charms, blending the noble height of Diana with the exuberant contours of a Hebe. Then her large bright eyes and a pair of luscious red lips gave animation

to her countenance, her smile in her gay moments was sweet, but with an expression of soft sensuousness, and sweeter still when expanding so as to reveal the teeth of ivory whiteness. Although her person was upon a large scale and her limbs were robust and massive, yet were they symmetrically sculptured, with due fineness in the hands, the taper fingers, the rounded ankles, and the long narrow feet. Thus, altogether, Penelope Arbuthnot was well calculated to be admired, even amidst a throng of court beauties, and she was of that voluptuous figure and also of that age, being twenty-six, which were especially pleasing to the prince regent.

That she had become the mistress of his Royal Highness some five months previously to the date of which we are at present writing, the reader is well aware. How is it, then, that she looks mournful and unhappy now? Does she regret the surrender of her person to the prince? Did she feel no gratification in thus acquiring that favour which so many higher-born damsels panted for in vain? Or has she already experienced some treatment on the part of her royal paramour to produce this depression of spirits?

In the midst of her reverie the door of the chamber opened, and her mother entered the room. It was a look of almost hatred which Penelope flung toward her parent, as the opening and closing of the door suddenly startled the young lady from her profound meditation.

"My dear child," began Mrs. Arbuthnot, as she advanced, in a coaxing manner, toward her daughter, "how is it that I find you in this moping mood?"

"Mother," cried Penelope, rising to her feet and looking sternly upon her parent, "how is it possible you can ask me this question, when you yourself ought to be able to solve the enigma, if such it be to you?"

"I suppose, my dear," said the bedchamber woman, for such was Mrs. Arbuthnot in the queen's household, "I suppose that you have acquired the certainty as to your condition?"

"Yes," interrupted her daughter, bitterly. "I am indeed in a way to become a mother. And now will you tell me what name my child is to bear when it comes into the world?"

"You speak, Penelope, as if you were the only young lady

who had ever intrigued with a prince. If you had married a plain Mr. Smith or a humble Mr. Jones, your child would be called Thomas or Jane Smith, or Henry or Mary Jones, just as the circumstances of the sex might be, but as it is, the father of your child can make it a lord or a lady; and it is but to look over a list of the most high-sounding names and choose the one that pleases you best."

"Mother," answered Penelope, fixing a strange look upon her parent, while the colour suddenly fled from her cheeks, leaving them as pale as marble, "do you remember that when you first proposed to me that I should abandon myself to the prince, I bade you beware lest all this should teach me to despise and contemn, perhaps even hate, my own mother? Ah! I fear that that hour is now come; and assuredly, whatever feeling of bitterness I might have entertained toward you when you first entered the room ere now, it has been enhanced by the flippancy of your last observation."

"Flippancy, my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I was merely telling you the truth."

"Ah! but even allowing your words to be taken seriously," cried Penelope, "let us suppose that I had married a plain gentleman or an honest shopkeeper, would not my child have had an honourable name, and from its very birth the fond care of a father?"

"All this would be well enough," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a look very much resembling disgust, "if you were a young, sentimental girl of seventeen or eighteen, who had been seduced under very cruel circumstances by some treacherous admirer and under a promise of marriage. But really, as matters now stand, there is something too absurd in a young woman of your age, past six and twenty, and with the prince regent as your lover."

"Lover!" echoed Penelope, her looks again expressing a strange bitterness. "Do you call an ungrateful sensualist, an unfeeling profligate like that, a lover?"

"Penelope, there is something in your mind with which I am unacquainted," said her mother, now surveying her with a more fixed and earnest attention than at first. "What has occurred? Anything new, anything unpleasant?"

"Listen, mother, and I will tell you," replied Penelope, as she pointed to a chair, while she resumed her own at the

window. "You know that the prince regent paid a hurried visit to the castle last evening, to consult her Majesty upon something of importance."

"Yes, I am aware of it; and I presume that you are offended because his Royal Highness was too hurried and too anxious to get back to London to pass the night here, so that he might have been in your arms, or even to be able to snatch a short half-hour's conversation with you ere he went."

"You are wrong, mother, you are wrong," exclaimed Penelope. "The prince did snatch half an hour to speak to me alone last evening, and it is precisely in consequence of what then took place between us that you see me as I am this morning. But again I beg you to listen, — that is to say, if you indeed desire explanations from my lips?"

"I do; you must know I do," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, now displaying an evident anxiety, for she began to fear that something was wrong between her daughter and the prince. "Proceed, my dear child."

"I need scarcely remind you," continued Penelope, "that when first you proposed that I should become the mistress of the prince, I listened to you in amazement and in horror. But you told me a tale of pecuniary embarrassments, — which I have since discovered to be false, — and you used so much persuasion, that, in short, I knew not what to do unless it were to yield. And I did yield. Then, the barrier of virtue once broken down, I gave myself up to the enjoyments of sensual passion, and likewise to ambitious dreamings. The prince, every time he came to the castle, treated me with kindness, even with a show of affection; he gave me a few presents, as you are aware, and he made many brilliant promises. Three or four weeks ago I hinted to him my apprehension that the effects of our amour would in time become visible, but he did not seem to care much about the intelligence I thus imparted to his ear. Indeed, he received it with a kind of indifference, which struck me to be heartless and even cruel. But I dared not admit to myself that such was the case. I endeavoured to reason my mind out of that belief, and therefore was it that I kept my fears from you. But last evening I took the opportunity of whispering to the prince that I besought a few minutes interview with him, and he contrived that

it should take place previous to his departure. Then I assured him that what I had hinted at as a possibility a month back had now become a certainty. Oh, mother, I expected — no, I cannot say that I expected, for my mind had been previously haunted with sore misgivings on the subject, but I had hoped that his manner might change, and that when he learned that he was beyond all doubt to become the father of my child in due course, he would treat me with tenderness and affection. But, ah! if you had beheld the careless indifference, nay, even the coldness, with which he received my words — "

Here Penelope stopped suddenly short, and burst into tears.

" My dear child," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, now becoming frightened, " this in indeed serious. I had not anticipated such a thing."

" No, mother," exclaimed Penelope, bitterly, as she wiped away her tears, " I am well aware of all that has been passing in your mind. You have buoyed yourself up with the hope that the prince would provide brilliantly alike for me and the coming babe, and that in the splendour of the position to which he would raise me, my disgrace should be altogether absorbed. Judging by all he had done for Lady Sackville, you flattered yourself that he would make a peeress of me, bestow upon me a handsome pension, and by loading me with favours, make me the object of envy and adoration in the court circle, so that some proud nobleman would be glad to lay his coronet at my feet and sue for my hand. Yes, these have been your hopes, these have been your dreams. To this end have all your intrigues and machinations been directed."

" Penelope, you are right, you are right," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. " But do not tell me that my hopes are to be disappointed."

" They are, they are," rejoined her daughter, now greatly excited. " I tell you that I have no hold upon the prince's affections. I never had; it was as a toy and a plaything for the moment that I have served. He is sated with me, and he scarcely had the delicacy to conceal it."

" Oh, the ungrateful monster ! " cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, now trembling with rage. Then the next moment she began to shed tears of vexation. " But perhaps he was in an angry

mood, Penelope?" she suddenly exclaimed. "Perhaps he had something to vex him? It is well known that he feels deeply the loss of Venetia."

"Yes, it is because he loves Venetia as much as a debauched sensualist like him can possibly love a woman otherwise than as the object of gross indulgence, it is because he loves her, I say," continued Penelope, with the emphasis of bitter vexation, "because he pines after her, because he yearns for her, that all his thoughts, all his sympathies, and all his longings are centred in her, and that he has no room in his heart for even the slightest feeling of pity on behalf of me!"

"But tell me what he said? How did he behave to you last evening?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, anxiously.

"Oh, it is useless to enter upon these details," exclaimed Penelope. "Suffice it to say that when I told him my position and besought his advice, he answered, with a cold indifference, that he had no doubt you would be able to manage the matter easily enough when the time came, that I must go into retirement for awhile, with leave of absence from court, and that if I wanted a few hundred pounds he dared say he should be able to spare them. Now, mother," asked Penelope, with a biting irony, "what becomes of your fine fabric of hope and ambition after all this?"

"Penelope, I am distressed beyond measure," answered her mother. "The prince's conduct is cruel and heartless to a degree. I had never a very high opinion of his character for generosity and honour, but I certainly did not expect that he would show such brutal callousness as this."

"Mother," rejoined Penelope, "you have sold me to a villain. Would it not have been better that I should have become the honoured wife even of a humble Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones?" and there was again a terrible irony in the young lady's words and a malicious fire in her eyes.

"Daughter, do not make things worse by showing a bad temper. Perhaps everything is not as bad as you fancy it. There is plenty of time before you. Months will elapse ere your condition will become visible, and in the meantime who knows how the prince's humour may change? He will altogether have forgotten his Venetia."

"Yes, and will have taken up with some other mistress,

equally brilliant, or if not so brilliant as Venetia, at all events sufficiently splendid to keep me altogether in the background."

"Do not give way to this despondency," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, determined to hope even until the very last. "We must think of what is to be done. I do not pretend for a moment that you are so beautiful as Lady Sackville, but you are nevertheless a very fine young woman, and it is impossible that the prince can remember your charms with indifference. I am really afraid, Penelope, that you yourself have not played your cards well, that you have not exerted all your powers of fascination, that you have not done your best to please and captivate the prince. Perhaps you have been cold."

"No, mother," answered the young lady, a crimson glow now mantling upon her cheeks, then rapidly suffusing itself over her neck and upon the luxuriant orbs of her heaving bosom, "when once the barrier of chastity was broken down, I surrendered myself up, as I have already told you, to the intoxicating delights of passion, and was a very wanton in the prince's arms. But even now, mother, you are labouring hard to deceive yourself. You are still striving to buoy yourself up with hope when there is none. I tell you that we shall obtain nothing from the prince. In short, I am a cast-off mistress, and oh, deep, deep is the humiliation."

As she gave utterance to these last words, all the glow of shame, which had risen to her cheeks and suffused her neck when she confessed herself a wanton, fled away, leaving her pale as marble, and her looks sank into the profoundest melancholy.

"It is awkward, awkward indeed," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, not knowing exactly what course to adopt.

"Awkward, mother! Is that the term to be applied to this cruel embarrassment?" suddenly exclaimed Penelope, raising her eyes and looking with mingled indignation and reproach in her parent's face. "May it not prove utterly ruinous? Think you not that it is generally suspected that I have been the prince's mistress? And so long as it is believed I am in high favour with him, the old queen herself will shut her eyes upon the amour, and the ladies of the court will pet, caress, and envy me. But the moment it is

known that the princely favour exists for me no longer, will not the queen be the very first to look coldly upon me, and will not her ladies treat me with scorn, mockery, and contempt? Yes, but even this is not all; the worst is behind. For if accident should reveal my position before I can obtain leave to go into retirement, shall I not be expelled ignominiously from the court, and would not you be involved in my ruin? Then what is to become of us? While we were poor, we always contrived to live somehow or another, because our characters were not gone, but if once thrown upon the world, with our reputations blasted, I as an unwedded mother, and you as the wretched, disappointed pander to your daughter's shame, who will take us by the hand, who will befriend us, what shall we do? "

But Mrs. Arbuthnot was not listening to the latter part of her daughter's speech. She had fallen into a deep reverie, and was revolving in her mind a variety of plans that suggested themselves as a means of encountering the present emergency. When Penelope had ceased speaking, she also sank into a meditative mood, and there was a long pause before either mother or daughter again broke silence.

" My dear child," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, " I have it, I have it! Depend upon it, I shall be enabled to bring the prince to reason, and make him do something for you."

" Anything, mother, so long as it will ensure our positions at court," cried Penelope, " and save me from disgrace. But what plan have you in your head? "

" Leave it to me, child, do not ask me any questions now. I must act, and not talk." Then, as she rose from her seat, she added, " Be of good cheer, I feel convinced that the prince regent will not only be brought to terms, but even perhaps be compelled to do more for us than we have ever anticipated. I am now going to London."

Penelope's curiosity was greatly excited, and her hopes were also revived by the tone of confidence in which her mother spoke, but Mrs. Arbuthnot would say no more at present, and again bidding her daughter be of good cheer, she quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CAPTAIN'S VISIT

It was between three and four in the afternoon of the same day, and the prince regent was seated alone at luncheon in one of the splendid apartments at Carlton House. His Royal Highness had been giving audience to Ministers and ambassadors during the early part of the day, and, much fatigued with the ceremonies, he was now refreshing himself with some luxurious viands and racy wines; but from time to time he made a movement of impatience, muttering half-aloud, "I wish to Heaven that Venetia were here!"

Having pushed away his plate, he threw himself back upon the sofa where he was seated, and as he continued to sip his wine, gave way to his reflections.

"Venetia has certainly abandoned me altogether. She will not come back; her husband has left me and has gone to join her. She is therefore lost to me for ever. Ah, who shall supply her place? Ernestina, who in voluptuous beauty of person came nearest to Venetia, is no more, and amidst the whole bevy of fair ones in whose arms I have already revelled, or who are ready to bestow their favours upon me if I say but the word, there is not one that can compare with Venetia, no, not one."

The prince regent was in a melancholy mood, and he felt that the wine did not inspire him with spirits. He wished for a companion at that moment, to enliven him with hilarious conversation, and he was thinking for whom he should send, when the door opened and a domestic came to announce that Captain Tash solicited an audience.

"Ah! Tash is come back, then!" muttered the prince to himself. "I am glad of it; he is the very fellow to cheer me

up in my present low spirits," and he accordingly bade the footman introduce the captain immediately.

This command was promptly obeyed, and the gallant officer, who was apparelled in the same remarkable fashion as when we beheld him visiting in his cabriolet at Leveson House, made his appearance. The domestic withdrew, and the prince, giving the captain a cordial welcome, bade him sit down and help himself to wine.

"I hope that I see your Royal Highness in a blooming condition," said the captain, as he deliberately filled a tumbler with port wine to the brim. Then, having drained the glass as quietly and calmly as if its contents had been water, he observed, "Pardon me, prince, if I am too familiar, but you look a trifle out of sorts."

"And I feel so, too, Tash," responded his Royal Highness. "But before we talk upon any other subject, give me an account of your proceedings."

"I have fulfilled your Royal Highness's instructions to the very letter," said the captain, "and I will now give you the details with the most perfect accuracy. On receiving your Royal Highness's orders, last week, I proceeded at once to the surgeon's house in Bridge Street, and requested an immediate interview with the young man bearing the singular name of Jack the Foundling. At first the surgeon told me that no such person was there, but when I whispered in his ear to the effect that I came from your Royal Highness, his manner changed in a moment, he looked significant enough, and conducted me up-stairs to a nice, comfortable, room, where I was introduced to the young man. The surgeon left us together, and I began speaking to him in the kindest and friendliest way. Indeed, that is my nature, as I am an uncommon good-tempered fellow. I soon saw that the lad took a fancy to me, and we speedily got upon very good terms with each other. I asked him if he had altogether recovered from the effects of his wound, and he said that he had pretty well, though he did not feel so strong as before he had received it, notwithstanding so many months had elapsed. I then represented to him that there was some kind friend in the background who had interested himself on his behalf, and had been paying the surgeon all this time to take care of him and treat him with every possible attention. The lad said that he knew very well the surgeon had

not been keeping him there for the last seven or eight months out of mere philanthropy, particularly as a certain sort of mystery had been observed in making him stay indoors as much as possible, and only taking him out for an airing occasionally of an evening in a carriage. I answered that all this had been done with the view of preventing him from falling again into the hands of the infamous people with whom he had been brought up and who might have been on the lookout for him. Thereupon Jack the Foundling observed that during the time he lay stretched upon a sick-bed, in consequence of his wound, he had reflected upon his past career, and had hoped that something would be done to prevent him from relapsing into his old habits."

" Then he did really seem as if he wished to turn over a new leaf? " asked the prince.

" No doubt of it, your Royal Highness," responded Tash, taking the opportunity of the interruption to refill and empty his tumbler. " The lad told me that some time ago Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the Bow Street officer, had tried to reclaim him, but that some evil spirit getting possession of his soul, prompted him to return to his old friends. He assured me, however, that his long illness had given his mind a better turn, and he really felt anxious to do something honest for his livelihood. I then told him that his former protector, Daniel Coffin, had that very morning been arrested for murder, and would be hanged as sure as he himself had tucked up scores in his time. The young fellow had not previously heard of the occurrence, and he certainly did not seem much affected by it, but observed that he always thought Coffin would come to some bad end. He nevertheless did manifest some uneasiness about a young woman and her brother, named Melmoth, and who, he said, lived with Daniel Coffin. He told me that he and these Melmoths had been brought up together, and that he had a sort of affection for them. I assured him that from what I had learned they did not appear to be at all involved in Coffin's troubles, and I even went so far as to declare that I would see something was done for them in case Coffin should go out of the world leaving them destitute. This assurance evidently gave young Jack very great satisfaction, and looking hard at me, he said, ' I suppose, sir, you are the

kind friend who has been in the background all the while and who has interested himself in me?' 'Well, well, my boy, perhaps I am,' said I, 'perhaps I am, but I don't say so, mind, and you must not ask me any more questions.' That was the way I managed him, your Royal Highness," added Tash, "for a man who can parry a thrust with a rapier is not likely to be at a loss to do the same with a searching question."

"You acted most prudently, my dear fellow," said the prince, laughing. "Come, fill your tumbler again, and then proceed."

"This wine is excellent," observed Tash, when he had poured another quantum down his throat. He then went on to say, "You see, sir, I played my part so well that the lad soon had confidence in me, and maybe he thought that I was either his father, or some very near relation, having particular reasons not to acknowledge him openly. However, be that as it may, he certainly received the impression that I was the kind friend who had been in the background during his residence at the surgeon's, and that I had at length come forward to take some decisive step respecting his future prospects."

"And of course you suffered that impression to remain upon his mind?" said his Royal Highness, interrogatively.

"To be sure I did," responded Tash. "Was it not in obedience to the hints you had previously given me for my guidance in the matter? However, to make a long story as short as possible," continued the captain, "I went on to explain the plan which was proposed for the future benefit of the youth. I told him that if he liked to go out to Jamaica, a comfortable situation in a mercantile house, with a good salary, was at his service in that island, that there was a ship then in the Downs to sail with the next fair wind, and that if he would go down with me to Deal and embark in that vessel, I would place a hundred guineas in his hands ere taking leave of him on board. I showed him the letter from the London branch of the Jamaica house, guaranteeing the situation, and I also showed him the money. He did not take many minutes to consider, but gave his consent with joy and gratitude. The business being thus settled, I sent and ordered a post-chaise, and away we sped into Kent. We reached Deal that evening, and went at once to

a slopdealer's or outfitter's, where I bought him a sea-chest and everything suited for the voyage. Next morning we went on board the ship, but as the wind did not change favourably till yesterday, the vessel had to remain at anchor in the Downs for some days. I stayed with him on board, for having once succeeded in getting him there, I did not choose to trust him out of my sight, or give him the chance of slipping away in some boat, in case he altered his mind. But he did not appear to repent of his decision; on the contrary, his spirits rose in proportion as he became accustomed to shipboard. As for me, I managed to pass the time pretty pleasantly, for the captain of the vessel was a jovial good chap, and there were six or eight merry blades of passengers on board. So I amused myself by making them all drunk every night, and when I parted from them yesterday afternoon, they swore I was the best fellow in existence. As for Master Jack, I gave him his hundred guineas at parting, and he wept with gratitude. I saw the ship sail, and this morning I took a post-chaise and returned straight to London, to report all these particulars to your Royal Highness. So here I am, and that's my history."

"You have acquitted yourself most admirably, my dear captain," said the prince. "I knew full well that you would not fail to execute my commission with delicacy, prudence, and caution, keeping me altogether out of sight and out of the question while conversing with the lad. But tell me, he had not the slightest suspicion that I had ever interested myself concerning him?"

"Not the slightest," responded Tash. "The surgeon had evidently been most discreet and reserved during the many months the young fellow was under his roof. Besides, have I not already told you, sir, that, so far from even dreaming of your intervention in his behalf, Master Jack was perfectly convinced that he saw his previously unknown friend in me?"

"True, to be sure!" ejaculated the prince. "But now let us talk of other things. While you were gone I lost my young friend, your boon companion."

"What, Sackville?" exclaimed the captain. "Ah! I knew full well, before I went, that he would leave your Royal Highness. Those letters he received from his wife made him quite spoony, and when Sir Valentine Malvern

paid his debts, it regularly clinched the nail of his sentimentalism. And so he is gone? Well, he behaved very handsomely to me. When I went and told him, last Sunday, that I should most likely have to leave town for a few days, he took me by the hand, saying, 'Tash, my dear fellow, you have been my companion for some months past, in many a frolic, and though I am going to turn over a new leaf, I do not mean at the same time to show you the cold shoulder. All my debts are paid, and all the bills on which your name appeared together with mine are got in and burned. So you have nothing to fear on that score; and there are five hundred guineas for you, as a token of friendship.' In this manner was it that we parted, and therefore I have nothing to say against Sackville. Depend upon it, sir, he will settle down into a quiet, steady, domesticated husband, always keeping regular hours, taking his supper every night at nine with his wife, and going to bed at half-past ten or eleven, at the latest, except when they receive company."

"Ah! I wish, my dear Tash," said the prince, with a sigh, "that you could bring Venetia back to me; but I am very much afraid that all your ingenuity will not suffice for such an achievement."

"I really don't think it would, sir," rejoined the captain, as he refilled his tumbler, "for everybody who knows Venetia at all must be aware that she is a woman of strong mind and has got a will of her own. Take my advice, prince, and look about you for some other mistress."

"Well, I suppose I must resign myself to that alternative," answered his Royal Highness. "But now, Tash, tell me what I can do for you? In this matter of the lad whom we have just shipped off to the Colonies, you have done me a particular favour. I have not told you why I am at all interested in him, I do not mean to tell you, and I know that you are too discreet to ask me any questions."

"I would sooner shave my moustache and cut off my whiskers," exclaimed Tash, "than display an impertinent curiosity. Whenever your Royal Highness commands, there is at least one who will yield blind and implicit obedience, and that one is honest Rolando Tash. But I think," he continued, again filling his tumbler, "that your Royal Highness was at the moment graciously condescending

to ask what you could do for me as a token of approval in respect to my conduct? "

"Well, name your wishes," said the prince. "But pray be reasonable," he added, laughing, "for if it's money you want, I have devilish little of that commodity to spare. If you would like some little situation — "

"The very thing! " exclaimed the captain. "The truth is, prince, I want to settle down in a comfortable and respectable way, and my man Robin also wishes it, and Robin's opinion has great weight with me. I am well-nigh tired of frequenting taverns and gaming-houses, and getting into scrapes with constables and watchmen for night-rows and so on, while Robin is equally tired of standing behind lamp-posts or sneaking up into corners and doorways. Besides," added the captain, lowering his voice to a mysterious kind of whisper, "I have been seriously thinking of matrimony."

"Matrimony! What, you? " ejaculated the prince, and he burst out laughing.

"Well, I am glad your Royal Highness can laugh so heartily at last," observed Tash, "for you looked as glum and mopish as a mute at a dead man's door when I came in. But, 'pon my soul, I am in earnest. Indeed, I never was more in earnest in my life," and as if to ratify his words, the captain refilled his tumbler and tossed off the contents at a draught.

"But are you in love? " inquired the prince.

"Not I. I never was in love in my life, that is to say, in real sentimental, poetizing, moonlight, spoony kind of love. I never wrote sonnets to a lady's beauty, but conveyed my admiration by the far more practical method of giving her a hearty kiss at once."

"Then I presume," continued the prince, still laughing, "that if you are not in love, but mean to marry, you are on the lookout for a lady with a fortune? "

"That is just about the mark," responded Captain Tash. "A lady with some four or five hundred a year would suit my purpose uncommonly."

"But that is no great fortune, after all," observed the prince. "Must she be beautiful, into the bargain? "

"Well, I cannot say that I am prepared to throw myself away upon an old harridan as shrivelled as a mummy, and at the same time I do not want a silly young creature of

sixteen or seventeen, who looks as if she had just left off pinafores and escaped from the nursery. You see, my dear prince, that a fine-looking man like me — and this I may say without vanity — must have a wife to correspond. In short, Mrs. Tash should be a commanding woman, thirty years of age, or thereabouts, and if I can meet with such a one, I think that I could guarantee becoming a very excellent husband."

"Do you mean me to help you to this acquisition?" asked the prince, "because I can assure you that it is not at all in my way. Unless, indeed," he added, laughing, "it were some cast-off mistress that I wanted to get rid of and provide for."

"Upon my soul, a man may do worse things," answered Captain Tash, "than take a prince's cast-off mistress. However, as you, sir, have nothing of that sort handy at the moment, we needn't say another word. But to return to what we were talking of, namely, the testimonial of your Royal Highness's approval of my conduct —"

"Ah! that's it," said the prince. "Well, leave it to me, Tash. You are a good fellow, and I shall provide for you. Come to me again in a few days and we will talk the matter over."

The gallant officer made due acknowledgments for this kind promise, and then took his departure. As soon as he was gone, the prince seated himself at a side table where there were writing materials, and penned a letter to his sister the Princess Sophia, informing her that her son was at length fully provided for, having sailed for the Colonies. Scarcely had he sealed and despatched this letter to St. James's Palace, where her Royal Highness dwelt, when a domestic entered to state that Mrs. Arbuthnot solicited an immediate audience of the prince regent.

"Ah! I can guess what this is about," he said to himself, with a start of impatience; but deeming it more prudent to see her, he desired that she might be admitted.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE INTRIGUING MOTHER

When Mrs. Arbuthnot entered the room, she found the prince seated upon the sofa near the table on which the refreshments were spread, and she instantaneously saw that his look and manner were full of a cold hauteur, a sort of a tacit warning to make her aware that he was in no humour to put up with any "scene." Her demeanour was profoundly respectful, with a tinge of reproachful mournfulness, for she was a thorough adept in all hypocrisies and artifices, and knew full well how to assume an aspect suitable to any occasion or to any circumstances.

The prince partially rose from his seat, bowed distantly, and waved his hand toward a chair; then, without uttering a word, he awaited the explanation of this visit.

"Your Royal Highness will graciously pardon me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, commencing in the gentlest and mildest tone, for she was desirous to see what humble persuasion would do first, ere she had recourse to the alternative of harsher means, "your Royal Highness will pardon me for this intrusion, but it is on a very painful matter that I have ventured to approach the representative of my sovereign."

"Proceed, madam," said the prince, with a slight bow, and with a glacial courtesy of manner.

"My daughter Penelope," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "is in a way to become a mother, and she is profoundly anxious relative to the future."

"I told your daughter, madam," responded the prince, "that when the time came that she could no longer conceal her situation, — and that, from what she told me, will be some months hence, — she could easily retire from the court for a short period, under suitable arrangements, which your

experience, no doubt," he added, somewhat ironically, " will enable you to carry into effect."

" Sir, wherefore this species of taunt thrown out against me? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot. " Would you insinuate that I am accustomed to suggest or invent plans to conceal the disgrace of young ladies? If so, your Royal Highness is exceedingly mistaken."

" Madam, I cannot forget the facility with which you lent yourself to the little freak which made me covet your daughter, and therefore I naturally suppose that such pandering pastimes cannot be altogether strange to you."

" Does your Royal Highness mean that my daughter was not pure and chaste when she received you to her arms? " exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, scarcely able to repress her indignation, " or would you imply that through my agency she had been frail before? "

" No, I mean nothing of the sort," answered the prince. " I do not wish to throw the slightest aspersion on Miss Penelope's honour previous to her intimacy with me. On the contrary, I will even declare my conviction that she was pure and chaste, as you express it; but it is not the less a fact that you yourself intrigued cunningly enough to hand her over to me. Am I not therefore justified in supposing that, as you got her into the scrape, so you will get her out of it? And as I hinted to her last night, if she wants a few hundred pounds, as a matter of course they are entirely at her service. What more can I do? What more do you require? "

" I had flattered myself, sir," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, again relapsing into that coaxing, fawning, toad-eating manner which was habitual to her, and had been acquired by a long career of grovelling servility toward all with whom she had lived, " I had flattered myself that my poor girl would not have been thus discarded by your Royal Highness with scarcely even a kind word — "

" Then I suppose that she has explained to you," interrupted the prince, " everything which took place between us last evening at Windsor Castle? Now, let me be explicit on my side. From what your daughter said to me, it was quite evident she had entertained the loftiest pretensions. I do not exactly know of what nature these may have been, or to what height her ambition soared, but certain it is that

she expected some signal reward for having honoured me with her favours. Now, let me tell you, my dear madam," continued his Royal Highness, ironically, "that young ladies generally conceive they are honoured by the circumstance of winning my favour, and if I were to shower rewards upon all the sweet creatures who received me to their arms I should have quite enough to do. Perhaps your daughter fancied that I ought to make her a peeress in her own right, of give her a pension of a thousand a year. God bless you, ma'am, if all my mistresses were similarly ambitious and mercenary, the world would be perfectly astonished at the number of peeresses I should have to create, and the House of Commons, obedient and ductile as it is, would stand aghast at the frightful increase of the pension list."

Mrs. Arbuthnot remained silent for upwards of a minute, not knowing exactly whether to continue arguing the point peaceably, or whether at once to have recourse to harsher and sterner means. The prince, fancying that he had advanced an argument which had put her to confusion, and indeed confounded her altogether, rose from his seat, bowed stiffly, and was advancing to pull the bell as an intimation that the interview was over, when Mrs. Arbuthnot said, in a somewhat determined voice, "Then your Royal Highness is resolved to do nothing for my daughter?"

"What can I do?" he ejaculated, impatiently. "The bare idea that she abandoned herself to me from the mercenary motives which have since transpired is but too well calculated to fill me with disgust, and as I never entertained a very high opinion of the mother, I am sorry to say that I am now led to think with equal indifference of the daughter," and again he advanced toward the bell.

"Stay, sir, one moment," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, suddenly throwing off all the fawning servility of the hypocritical toad-eater, and putting on a dogged air of resoluteness, "our interview is not quite ended yet."

"Madam," said the prince, turning upon her a look of the loftiest disdain, "if you were a man, I should ring to order my lackeys to expel you unceremoniously, but as you are a woman, I cannot treat you with that ignominy. At the same time, permit me to request that you immediately leave the room."

"And were I a man," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I should

be induced to flog you with a horsewhip for the baseness and heartlessness of your conduct. As it is, I warn you that I have the power of wreaking a terrible revenge."

"Now, will you explain yourself?" said the prince, becoming frightened, and scarcely able to conceal that he was so, for he instantaneously saw that Mrs. Arbuthnot would never dare adopt such a demeanour as this and use such words as those unless fully confident of wielding some terrible weapon of vengeance.

"If your Royal Highness will resume your seat," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, speaking with more calmness, "I will very speedily explain my meaning."

The prince returned to the sofa, and sat down without saying a word.

"Believe me," continued the bedchamber woman, "it is painful, most painful, to be compelled to adopt such a tone as I am now using, but neither I nor my daughter are worms to be trodden upon with impunity. I am in possession of a secret regarding a member of the royal family, a secret of such fearful import that if made known it would strike the whole country, ay, and all the world, with terror and consternation — Shall I go on?"

"Yes, explain yourself," answered the prince, not knowing to what possible circumstance Mrs. Arbuthnot could allude; and, unfortunately for him, there were so many important secrets connected with himself and his family that he was at a loss to fix upon the one that was known to his visitress.

"Then I must proceed," she continued, "and it is with pain that I do so. Sir, the secret to which I allude intimately concerns the honour, the character, and if he were of humbler station, the very life of your royal brother the Duke of Cumberland. There is a document in existence —"

"A document! But of what kind? What does it refer to?" demanded the prince, nervously agitated.

"Sir, it is a letter which the murdered Sellis —"

"Murdered!" echoed the prince, instantaneously catching the significancy of Mrs. Arbuthnot's expression. "No, he committed suicide. The coroner's inquest proved it —"

"That your Royal Highness firmly believes the story of the unfortunate man's suicide, I have no doubt," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "but there are proofs to the contrary."

"And those proofs?" ejaculated the prince.

"Listen, and I will tell you everything."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then proceeded to sketch in rapid outline all that she had heard some short time back from Mrs. Bredalbane, and his Royal Highness, to do him justice, was horrified at the complexion which the frightful story now wore, and which involved such tremendous charges, not only against his brother, the Duke of Cumberland, but likewise his sister, the Princess Augusta. He rose from the sofa and began pacing the room in an agitated manner, giving frequent vent to ejaculations which showed how profoundly he felt the terrible things that had been revealed to him. That he himself might have had some distant suspicion of the possibility of his brother's guilt, relative to the death of Sellis, was probable, was even likely, but if so, he must ever have striven to put it away from his thoughts, as a man endeavours to shake off the influence of a hideous dream. But most assuredly the prince had never suspected that his sister Augusta had been so deeply criminal as he was now forced to believe her. Profligate, unprincipled, heartless, and depraved as he was, saturated with vices, capable of any iniquity in the pursuit of pleasure and in the conquest of female virtue, yet the prince regent was not so far removed from humanity and so nearly allied to the nature of a fiend as to remain indifferent to the details of Mrs. Arbuthnot's disclosures.

On her part, the wily woman saw how deeply the arrow had penetrated, and how excruciatingly its barbed head rankled in the heart which it had pierced, and she chuckled inwardly as she felt that some result beneficial to herself and daughter would ensue from the course she had taken.

"Can you procure that fragment of a letter written by Sellis?" suddenly asked the prince, as he stopped short in front of where the bedchamber woman had remained seated.

"Yes, I can," was her response.

"And you will do so?"

"I will."

"Of course you expect your reward?" continued the prince. "What is it to be?"

"I am moderate in my ambition," she answered. "All I need is that my own position at the court shall not be

endangered by the exposure of my daughter's shame, and therefore that she herself may be provided for."

"But how?" cried the prince. "I can give her money, but nothing more. I cannot give her a title, and that is what she was looking after. I saw, by everything she said last night, that such was her desire. If she were married, it were different. I could do something for her husband."

"Ah! if she were married it would indeed be easy — I understand," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "You can confer a title, a baronetcy, we will say, upon her husband, and it will be precisely the same thing, since the lustre of the rank would be reflected upon her. But how can she marry, situated as she is?"

"Hold!" ejaculated the prince, a sudden idea striking him. Then, after a few instants' deliberation, he said, "Mrs. Arbuthnot, if I were to find your daughter a husband who would accept her as she is, knowing that she has been my mistress, knowing also that seven months hence she will become a mother, if I find your daughter such a husband, I ask, will she accept him?"

"Assuredly she will, provided that this husband is at least a baronet, with an income sufficient to maintain my daughter in comfort, if not in splendour. But," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "he must not be a man of repulsive appearance, for I know that Penelope would not sacrifice herself to a person who might be loathsome to her."

"On the contrary," said the prince, his countenance brightening up somewhat as the project which he now revolved in his mind assumed greater consistency and feasibility, "on the contrary, the gentleman of whom I am now thinking is good-looking enough, and there are plenty of young ladies who would be well pleased with his appearance. As for the baronetcy, I promise you he shall have that, and I will likewise guarantee that his income shall not be less than six or seven hundred a year. Indeed, I will find for him some situation, the rangership of a park, the post of an ordnance storekeeper, or perhaps a consulship, — at all events, something both honourable and lucrative."

"I am perfectly contented with the proposed arrangement," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "and on Penelope's part I unhesitatingly accept it."

"When will you come with the document in your posses-

sion?" asked the prince. "Let there be no delay. To-morrow, if you will."

"And shall I bring Penelope with me, so that she may be introduced to her intended husband?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, her question plainly proving that she did not mean to give up Sellis's letter unless convinced that the prince regent, on his part, was prepared to carry out the propositions he had made.

"Yes, bring Penelope with you," was his Royal Highness's answer, "and she shall meet her intended here. Let the hour be three o'clock to-morrow."

"At three o'clock to-morrow I shall be punctual with my daughter."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then took her departure from Carlton House, rejoicing at the success of her visit, and determined in her own mind to purloin the letter of the murdered Sellis from her friend Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk. Accordingly, with this very honest intention, and likewise with an almost fevered anxiety to impart the good news which she had for her daughter's ears, Mrs. Arbuthnot hastened back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE INTENDED HUSBAND

On the following day, punctually at three o'clock, Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot made their appearance at Carlton House, and were at once ushered into an apartment where they found his Royal Highness waiting to receive them. At once rising from his seat with the most familiar courtesy, and even condescending friendliness of manner, the prince regent shook Mrs. Arbuthnot very warmly by the hand, and then throwing his arms around the voluptuously formed Penelope, bestowed upon her a hearty kiss.

Both mother and daughter were somewhat surprised at this remarkable change in the prince's manner, for the elder lady had not failed to acquaint Penelope with the freezing reserve which his Royal Highness had at first manifested toward her on the previous day, and how she had been compelled to use threats to bring him to reason. Of course Mrs. Arbuthnot was well pleased to observe this change, and Penelope submitted with a very good grace to the royal caress, although she now in her heart entertained the most cordial hate toward her seducer.

The prince made the two ladies sit down upon the sofa, and placing himself between them, he said, with an assumption of the most good-humoured jocularity, "Well, after all, this is really a very pretty drama in which we are engaged. But little did I think until yesterday that I should ever be called upon to play the part of a matrimonial agent. I declare that my observation makes you blush, Penelope. Yet I think that you will be well pleased when you see what a fine husband I have selected for you."

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Miss Arbuthnot, "that it is with no small degree of repugnance

I suffer myself to become an object of such indelicate arrangements. Your conduct has, however, left me no choice."

"I am afraid that I treated you somewhat harshly and cruelly the evening before last, when I saw you at Windsor Castle," said the prince, "but I had many things to vex me at the time."

"And chiefly of all, the loss of Lady Sackville," observed Penelope, with some little degree of bitterness.

"I will not deny that her loss has vexed me cruelly," answered the prince. "But I see that you are jealous," he added, laughing. "Now this is certainly not a sentiment to be entertained by a young lady who is on the point of marriage with a very fine, handsome, and agreeable man."

"Then your Royal Highness has really exercised a sound discretion in the choice of a husband for my daughter?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I mean, sir, that you have borne in mind the observations I made upon the point, and that you will not offer for Penelope's acceptance an individual whom she may be ashamed to acknowledge as her husband?"

"I hesitate not to say she will be proud of him," answered the prince. "I assure you he is good-looking, with a fine military air — But tell me, Penelope, do you like moustaches?"

"Sir," replied the young lady, colouring up to the very hair of her head, "there sounds something too much like a tone of banter in your speech to inspire me with much confidence as to the present proceeding. I am already sufficiently humiliated —"

"Pray do not be angry, my dear Penelope," interrupted the prince, passing his arm around her waist. "I only sought to make my peace with you by putting on my best possible humour, but if you feel offended, I can of course become as coldly dignified and freezingly haughty as ever I was in my life. I thought it better not to give too business-like and matter-of-fact an air to the present transaction."

"If that be indeed your motive, sir," responded Miss Arbuthnot, "I thank you for your kind consideration, and beg that you will retain your present humour." But while she thus spoke, she gently disengaged herself from the royal arm and moved a little nearer toward the extremity of the sofa.

" My dear madam," asked the prince, now turning toward Mrs. Arbuthnot, " have you procured the letter of which you spoke to me yesterday? "

" I have, sir," was the answer, and as she spoke, the lady produced the paper which she had succeeded in abstracting from Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk.

" You will permit me to look at it," said the prince. " Not that I mean to keep it," he added, laughing, " until Miss Penelope is introduced to her intended husband, and therefore the moment I have cast my eyes over it, I will return it to you."

" Rather, permit me to read the contents to your Royal Highness," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a significant look. " You will find that it is worded precisely as I told you yesterday, and that it is clearly corroborative of the tale told by the valet Joux and which I also described to you."

" Read the letter, then," said the prince, in a short, abrupt manner. " You must really think me very dishonourable to suppose for an instant that I would keep the paper if entrusted in my hands, and evade the fulfilment of the bargain entered into between us yesterday."

" Your Royal Highness should neither be surprised nor offended that I adopt the proper precaution," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, in a firm tone. " But listen, and I will read this letter."

With the contents of this fragmentary document the reader is already acquainted; we need not therefore reproduce it here. Suffice it to say that a gloom began to settle upon the prince's countenance as soon as Mrs. Arbuthnot commenced reading it aloud, and at the mention of that pointed allusion to the Princess Augusta's unnatural criminality, his Royal Highness gave a visible shudder. He said not a word, however, until she had finished, and even then he remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in a moody reverie.

" You two ladies," he at length said, " are acquainted with a secret which vitally concerns the honour of my brother and my sister. Rest assured that I am prepared to fulfil the conditions yesterday agreed upon. I have spoken to a gentleman, an intimate friend of my own, who is willing, Penelope, to become your husband. As I said ere now, in a good-humoured strain, and as I seriously repeat at present,

he is not one of whose personal appearance you need be ashamed. As for his social position, he already possesses a certain military rank, and here," continued the prince, producing a sealed document from his pocket, " is a patent drawn out, conferring upon him the title of a baronet. An appointment, to which is annexed an income of eight hundred a year, is likewise at his service. Thus you perceive I am ready to accomplish my part of the bargain without delay. I may add that the gentleman to whom I allude is at this moment within the walls of the palace, waiting to be introduced to you. In short, he is in an adjoining room. But now, what guarantee have I that when all these conditions are fulfilled fresh demands will not be made upon me, fresh documents of horror produced, and the threatened exposure of fresh secrets held in terror over me? "

" Prince," answered Penelope, speaking in a firm tone, and looking him full in the face with a calm dignity of demeanour, " I know not what guarantee can possibly be given you in respect to the eventualities to which you allude. But this I solemnly affirm on my own account: all I seek, all I have ever sought, is a position which shall save me from disgrace and poverty. This position your Royal Highness is now about to give me, and I can assure you that mine is not an ungrateful heart. If in every respect your royal word is fulfilled, I would sooner study to do you a service than work you an injury. As for my mother, I believe that her sentiments are precisely the same."

" Penelope has spoken so well, so truly, and so candidly upon the subject," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, " that I have really nothing to add, unless it be to remind your Royal Highness that should either of us hereafter prove ungrateful, the means of revenge are in your own hands. A word from your Royal Highness to the queen would deprive me of my situation at court, and a stroke of the pen would cancel the government situation to be conferred upon Penelope's husband. Surely, then, these are guarantees sufficient? "

" Yes, or at least I must consider them so," rejoined the prince. " But as you have proved so exceedingly suspicious of my good faith, and have even exhibited a disinclination to trust that letter in my hands, you cannot be surprised if I should be equally wary and cautious. There is now one more question I have to ask."

" Speak, prince," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, " and you will see that I am prepared to deal as candidly as possible with your Royal Highness."

" You have not yet told me," answered the prince, " from whom you received all these particulars relative to that frightful affair, and from whom you procured that document? "

" From Mrs. Bredalbane, one of her Majesty's bedchamber women," was Mrs. Arbuthnot's reply.

" Ah! I know her well, a regular old female courtier," said the prince, his countenance brightening up. " There is no harm to be anticipated at her hands. Besides," he muttered to himself, " when once that document " — alluding to Sellis's fragmentary letter — " is burned, the main evidence is gone and the tale shrinks into a mere piece of gossiping tittle-tattle. Well, then," he said, again speaking aloud, " I think that we have nothing more to say. But mind, it is understood that when I introduce her intended husband to Miss Penelope, and place in his hands the document conferring the baronetcy, that letter " — and he pointed to the one which Mrs. Arbuthnot held tight between her fingers — " shall be at once given over into my possession? "

" Such is the arrangement for which I myself should have stipulated," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

" But there is one thing of which no mention has been made," observed Penelope, and the flush of shame appeared upon her countenance as she spoke.

" Ah! I know what my daughter means," exclaimed her mother. " Has your Royal Highness frankly and candidly stated to the gentleman, whom as yet you have not named to us, Penelope's exact position? "

" He knows everything," answered the prince, " and such is his devotion to me that he will cheerfully bestow his name upon Miss Penelope. I think that every preliminary is now settled, and that nothing remains to be done save and except to introduce the individual in question."

Thus speaking, the prince rose from his seat and advanced toward a door at the extremity of the apartment. Penelope and her mother also rose, the former becoming greatly agitated, and the latter whispering hurried words of encouragement in her ears. Penelope accordingly sum-

moned all her courage to her aid, and intensely eager was the look of curiosity and suspense which she now fixed upon the door toward which the prince was advancing. He opened it, beckoned the young lady's future husband forth, and then turning quickly around as that gentleman made his appearance, exclaimed, " Ladies, permit me to introduce Sir Rolando Tash."

And our friend the captain indeed it was. Never in his own idea had he looked so blooming or so killing. His frock coat, one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast, was pinched in at the waist to such a degree that its wearer was compelled to draw his respirations in the softest manner possible, for fear the hooks and eyes should give way. His gray military trousers had stripes of the broadest gold lace down the legs, and his boots were so brilliantly polished as to be perfect mirrors for every article of furniture in the room. Indeed, as the gallant officer bowed to the ladies as low as his tightly fitting garments would permit, he caught a glimpse of his hirsute countenance on the surface of either boot. But his hair, his mustachios, his imperial, and his whiskers — heavens! who can describe their magnificence? He would have made the fortune of any perruquier in the Burlington Arcade by merely standing in the shop-window for a single half-hour each day. To do the captain full justice, however, all his hair was his own, and no pains had been spared to give it the richest gloss which bear's grease could impart, and the finest twist that curling-irons could produce. He wore a pair of dove-coloured gloves, and instead of one gold chain festooning over the outside of his coat, he wore two. The end of an embroidered cambric handkerchief peeped out of his pocket behind, and, to close our description, we must not forget to observe that he was as highly perfumed as if he had just been imported from those lands which are said to abound in myrrh, aloes, and cassia.

He was known by sight to both the ladies, and he knew them also, for when watching at the Green Dragon, as described in the earliest chapters of our history, he had seen the ladies at Acacia Cottage, and the ladies had seen him coming in and out of the Green Dragon aforesaid. So that when the prince had mentioned to him who the frail maid of honour was for whom a husband was required, Sir Ro-

lando Tash, as we must now call him, had at once jumped at the proposal, inasmuch as he had very highly appreciated the personal qualifications of Miss Penelope. Advancing, therefore, with the most studied demeanour of affability and jauntiness, Sir Rolando Tash smiled so as to exhibit his white teeth in contrast with the glossy darkness of his moustache, and when he reached the place where the ladies were standing, he literally confounded himself in bows and salutations.

Penelope was willing enough to receive this gentleman as a husband, but perhaps she would have laughed at the manner in which he now accosted her had not a sense of shame produced a more serious feeling.

"Come, Miss Arbuthnot," said the prince, "you need not be bashful. My very particular friend, Sir Rolando Tash, feels highly honoured at the prospect of conducting you to the altar; and if you are equally satisfied to accompany him thither, I do not see why your happiness should be delayed beyond to-morrow. A special license, St. George's, Hanover Square, a *déjeuner*, off in a chaise-and-four to spend the honeymoon at Brighton or Bath, and a paragraph in the newspapers to let the world know what has happened, — these are all that are now required."

"Fair lady," began Sir Rolando Tash, with another low bow, "may I venture to hope that my suit is acceptable, and that you are prepared to follow the kind suggestions of our mutual friend his Royal Highness the Prince Regent?"

Penelope gave her hand to the newly created baronet in token of an affirmative response, and her suitor gallantly raised that fair hand to his lips.

"Receive, my dear Sir Rolando, the patent which bestows the title I had already authorized you to bear," and as the prince thus spoke he presented the document to Penelope's intended husband.

At the same moment Mrs. Arbuthnot gave the prince Sellis's unfinished letter, which his Royal Highness at once consigned to his pocket.

We need not dwell any longer upon this episode in our history. Suffice it to say that Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope, on taking leave of the prince, were escorted by Sir Rolando Tash to the house of their friend, Miss Bathurst, in Stratton Street; and this lady, upon hearing what was in contempla-

tion, cheerfully received the mother and daughter, and at once volunteered to provide the wedding breakfast for the following morning. Sir Rolando Tash remained to dinner, and as he strove to render himself as amiable as possible, he succeeded uncommonly well, the only peculiarity in his manners which struck the ladies' attention being the little circumstance that he drank his wine out of a tumbler, and of that wine imbibed no small quantity. However, when he rose to take his leave, shortly after ten o'clock, he was evidently as sober as when he had sat down, thus proving that if he were fond of the bottle, the bottle had no particular enmity to him.

On the following morning Penelope became Lady Tash, and while the happy pair were being whirled away in a post-chaise to Bath, Mrs. Arbuthnot sped back to Windsor to resume her duties at the castle and to communicate her daughter's marriage to the queen. But ere closing this chapter, we must not forget to observe that the faithful Robin, in his brilliant suit of livery, was seated in the rumble of the post-chaise that conveyed his master and mistress to the fashionable watering-place where the honeymoon was to be passed.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BROTHER AND SISTER

In a neat little parlour, on the ground floor of a pretty cottage in Islington, Ariadne Varian and her brother Theodore were seated. It was in the middle of the day, and the sun was showing off all the gaudy colouring of the flowers in the garden behind the cottage. A Venetian blind, three parts drawn down, mellowed the golden effulgence ere it penetrated into the parlour, and thus there was a subdued light within that room.

Ariadne, who was seated at work with her needle, was dressed in white, and the virgin drapery set off the sylphid symmetry of her tall slender figure with the most bewitching effect. Her flaxen tresses, so soft and fine, fell in luxuriant profusion upon her beautiful sloping shoulders, and as from time to time she lifted her sweet azure eyes, when addressing her brother, who was sitting in a somewhat mournful mood, the lovely countenance of the young damsel wore an expression of immaculate innocence.

Theodore did not speak much. When his sister made a few remarks, evidently with the intention of cheering him, he answered her with all his wonted kindness, but still with a brevity which showed that he was in no humour for conversation, or, at all events, that his thoughts were far away from the topic on which she addressed him.

At length she said, after a pause which had lasted longer than previous ones, " My dear Theodore, you seem far from happy? "

" You know, my dearest Ariadne, what it is that troubles me. Deeply as I appreciate the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, immense as the gratitude is which I feel toward him, yet I cannot help abhorring this dependent position."

"I am well aware, Theodore," answered his sister, over whose countenance a slight blush had flitted at the mention of the baronet's name, "that you have done all you could to obtain another situation since the terrible fate of Mr. Emmerson deprived you of that which you held in his office, but as yet you have not succeeded, and I think that instead of repining at the succour which you have received from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, you ought to thank Heaven for having sent you so generous a friend."

"And so I do, Ariadne, and I have just told you so," responded Theodore. "But surely you yourself must feel that it is unseemly, it is even humiliating, to be dependent upon him for the bread which we eat, for the house which we live in, and for the garments which we wear."

"I do feel all that, my dear brother," returned the young damsel, "and I wish to Heaven that you would permit me to do what I have often and often begged you to allow."

"What, do needlework for the shops!" ejaculated Theodore. "No, my dear Ariadne, you shall not waste yourself to a shadow, dim your bright eyes, and sew your very winding-sheet, at that crushing, wretchedly paid occupation. I told Sir Douglas the other day, when he called, that I wished to obtain a situation, and he said he would speak to some mercantile friends upon the subject, but he has not been here since, and I fear that he has forgotten it. Do you know, Ariadne," said Theodore, after another pause, "that I have but a guinea left of the last sum which Sir Douglas's bounty forced upon me, and when that is gone I shall not know whence to obtain more, unless I procure a situation. Not for worlds could I apply to him again. Day after day have I called at warehouses, answered advertisements, and done everything I could to procure a situation, but, alas! alas! when I mentioned my name, and, as in duty bound, explained all that had happened to me and the dreadful ordeal through which I have passed, those to whom I applied instantaneously looked cold and begged to decline. Ariadne," exclaimed Theodore, bitterly, "although I have the document containing my full pardon in my pocket, yet it seems not sufficient to efface the Cain-brand of Newgate from my brow."

"O heavens, my dear brother," cried Ariadne, bursting into tears, "talk not thus!" and, putting aside her work,

she rose from her chair, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him tenderly.

"You are a sweet, dear girl," said Theodore, straining her to his breast, "and it is on account of you that I am unhappy. I feel that my position is worse than precarious, it is almost hopeless; and then, in the moments of my deepest despondency, I ask myself again and again what is to become of you. Methinks I shall take another name, conceal the fact that I have been unfortunate, and thus endeavour to get a situation."

"No, no, dearest brother," said Ariadne, who was now standing by his side with her hand upon his shoulder, and she seemed like an angel watching over a denizen of earth, "you must practise no deception. Let us put our faith in Heaven. God will not desert us."

"Ah! but am I deserving of God's favour?" suddenly exclaimed Theodore, conscience-stricken by the sense of the unmitigated virulence and savage perseverance with which he had hunted a fellow creature to the scaffold.

"Why do you speak thus?" asked his sister, now gazing down upon him as he remained seated in his chair while she continued standing by his side. "Why do you speak thus, I ask?" For the beautiful girl was totally ignorant of the course which her brother had adopted toward Emmerson.

"My dear sister," he immediately said, giving an evasive reply, "was I not criminal in wronging my employer even to the trifling amount in which I was a defaulter and notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances of the case?"

"Theodore," she answered, the tears again streaming from her eyes, "it was on my account you did that. Oh, I was the authoress of all your sufferings."

"Angel of purity that you are, accuse not yourself," ejaculated Theodore, starting from his seat, and again embracing her affectionately. "Come, dry your eyes; I must not see you weep. You know how I love you."

"Yes, and it is because you are such a dear, kind brother to me that God will not desert you," said Ariadne.

"Again I say, dry your eyes, look cheerful, smile upon me, and we will not yield to despondency. Let us go out for a walk together. I will devote the whole of this day to you, and to-morrow I will recommence my search after a situation. It is impossible but that I must sooner or later fall in with

some generous-minded man who will view my past misfortunes without prejudice. And now smile, Ariadne," said Theodore, smiling himself in order to win back the wished-for radiance to his sister's angelic countenance.

At this moment a knock was heard at the front door. It was a double knock, and a well-known one, too, for Theodore immediately exclaimed, "Here is Sir Douglas!"

The colour instantaneously mounted to Ariadne's cheeks, her gentle bosom heaved, and something like a sigh rose to her lips. But her brother observed not all this, for he had turned hastily around to meet the baronet whom the servant-girl had just admitted.

"My dear Theodore, how are you?" said Sir Douglas. "Miss Varian, I hope I find you well. But perhaps I am intruding at this moment?"

"You intrude? Never!" exclaimed Theodore, warmly pressing the hand of his benefactor, while Ariadne's looks unconsciously gave a similar assurance.

"Then, in that case I will sit down," said the baronet, "not only because I am somewhat tired, having walked all the way hither from the West End, but likewise because I wish to speak to you, Theodore, on some little business. But I dare say you are astonished when I tell you that I have walked? The fact is, when I come to see you I do not like such formal ceremony as driving hither in my carriage or cabriolet; indeed, I should be very much pleased to settle down into a quiet, unostentatious mode of life. However, it was not to hold forth upon my own likes or dislikes that I came hither now."

The baronet had seated himself while thus speaking; Ariadne and Theodore had also resumed their chairs, and both waited with some degree of suspense until Sir Douglas should explain the business to which he had alluded, for they alike thought and hoped it referred to his promise to interest himself in obtaining the young man a situation.

"When I was last here," resumed Huntingdon, "I said something about a mercantile firm with which I am acquainted. It is the head of the establishment who is my friend, and I could not see him before this morning, although I assure you I have called every day for that purpose. I dare swear you fancied I had forgotten it altogether."

"I have received too many proofs of your generosity,"

answered Theodore, " to think that you would intentionally neglect your kind promise; but I certainly feared that amid your engagements you had overlooked it."

" And did you think so also, Miss Varian? " asked Sir Douglas, turning his eyes upon the young damsel. But he gazed not on her as he had been wont to gaze on others of her sex; there was always an expression of respectful admiration in his countenance when he looked upon that fair young creature, around whom a halo of innocence seemed to dwell.

" I feared as my brother did," she answered, in a soft tone and with downcast eyes, " for I am well aware that a gentleman in your sphere must have so many things to engage his attention."

" Ay, but perhaps I think more of my friends when absent from them than you give me credit for," he said, good-humouredly. " It is not because I remain away from them that they are absent from my thoughts. However, to come to the point, I have seen Mr. Chapman, the wealthy merchant to whom I have alluded, and I fully and frankly explained to him everything. I must tell you that he has established two or three English agencies on the Continent, and it just happens that at this moment the manager of one of these agencies — I forget where he told me it was — has written to him to say that he requires a confidential young man to be sent to him at once, to supply a vacancy that has occurred in the branch establishment which he superintends. The salary is a hundred and fifty pounds a year, rising according to the merits of the individual, and as it is entirely for the English correspondence, a knowledge of foreign languages is not needed as a qualification. This situation, Theodore, is at your service. Indeed, it is yours already, and you have got nothing to do but to take my card and go at once to Lime Street and make the arrangements with Mr. Chapman."

Theodore's joy knew no bounds, and Ariadne shed tears of gratitude and delight. The brother and sister poured forth their acknowledgments as well as they were able, for their voices were suffocated, and Ariadne's well-nigh lost altogether, in the fulness of the emotions that swelled their hearts.

" My dear friends, I know you feel all you say, and much more," exclaimed the baronet, who was himself affected.

" But haste, Theodore, and be off into the City. Take a cab, never mind this extravagance for once, because I told Mr. Chapman you would call upon him this afternoon. Besides, I want you to come back as soon as you can, as I have made up my mind to pass the rest of the day with you. It is now half-past one o'clock. What time do you dine? Let us say four, and the interval will be ample enough for you, Theodore, to transact your business with my friend Chapman. Ah! now I see that Miss Varian does not like the idea of my inviting myself to dine with you? "

" Oh, Sir Douglas Huntingdon! " she exclaimed, with a sort of enthusiasm excited by her grateful feelings, " if you beheld a sudden change in my look, it is because I felt that we cannot entertain you as we could wish, or else — "

But she stopped short in the sweetest confusion.

" Miss Ariadne," answered the baronet, " I think that when I was here last I told you how simple my habits have become. The more frugal the fare, the better I shall like it, and therefore do not be uneasy on that account. Now, Theodore, lose no time, but be off. I suppose you will permit me to remain here until your return? "

" I am rejoiced that you purpose to do so," responded the young man, and there was a world of meaning in the look which he threw upon the baronet, for it was as much as to say, " I am not afraid to leave you alone with my sister, for I know that however gay your life may have been, you experience too generous a feeling and too great a respect for her to cast upon her even a glance tainted with impurity."

The young man accordingly hurried away, and the baronet was now left alone with Ariadne Varian.

" You can take up your work again if you like," said Huntingdon, " while I sit here and talk to you."

The damsel gladly availed herself of this permission, for it was with some degree of confusion and with a fluttering heart that she thus found herself alone with the baronet. She accordingly took up the work which she had ere now thrown aside, and it was in every respect a relief to be enabled to bend down her eyes upon it.

" Now, Miss Varian," resumed the baronet, after a brief pause, " tell me whether you approve of this arrangement which I have made for your brother? I do not know whether I have informed him accurately as to the amount of in-

come which he is to expect in the situation placed at his disposal. It may be a trifle more, but I am very certain it is not less. Mr. Chapman would have taken him into his establishment in London if I had chosen, but considering all the circumstances of the past, I thought it better that Theodore should go abroad, at all events for a few years. I am well aware how deeply he feels the past, but all the poignant memory thereof will be effaced when he shall have had a full opportunity of what the world calls retrieving his good name. Of course, knowing everything as I do, I may speak thus candidly to you, and now you understand the reasons which have induced me to procure him this situation abroad."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon, I feel and appreciate the delicacy of your conduct even more if possible than its generosity," and the damsel's sweet azure eyes were raised for a moment with a look of heartfelt gratitude, and then they fell again upon her work; but for truth's sake we are bound to say that the stitches she was now making were not very regular, nor such as she herself would have approved of had her thoughts been less confused and more concentrated in her occupation.

"And now you must tell me, Miss Varian," resumed the baronet, "whether you yourself will like to go abroad?"

"Oh, I would go to the ends of the earth in company with that dear brother," she exclaimed, "who has been so kind to me."

"Humph!" said the baronet. "The ends of the earth, eh? Then you are fully prepared to leave England? But you do not answer me. Of course you could not prefer, as a matter of choice, to leave your native land for so long a period. And yet I do not suppose you have any particular tie to bind you to London?"

"I hope," said Ariadne, in a voice which proved how deeply she was struggling to keep down the emotions that were rising up in her throat, "that you will permit me to see your kind housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, before I leave, for I never can forget her goodness to me while I was at your house."

"Most certainly, you shall see Mrs. Baines," answered the baronet. "By the bye, I can tell you an anecdote that will illustrate the goodness of that excellent woman's char-

acter, and prove how totally free from selfishness is her disposition. I must, however, preface it by informing you that a fortnight ago I called upon Lady Sackville, at Carlton House. It was the very day before she left it for good, and she then gave me to understand that she meant to turn over a new leaf. On that occasion I frankly confessed that I had formed a precisely similar determination, — and now that I recollect, it was on that same afternoon I came up to call upon you. I think, if I remember aright, that I meant to make you a confidante of my resolve, and even consult you in the matter, but I know not what humour it was which seized upon me, inducing me to postpone all discourse upon the subject. When I called upon you again the other day, it was with the same intent, but your brother was here all the time, and so I did not choose to make you my confidante or to ask your advice on that occasion. And now for my anecdote about Mrs. Baines. As I was leaving home this morning, I told her that I had something of importance to whisper in her ear. You should have seen how grave and serious the old lady suddenly became; her air had quite a diplomatic mysteriousness about it. She was evidently so proud of being admitted into my confidence and entrusted with my secrets. I began by reminding her that for the last few months I had grown quite steady, and had become a model of temperance and frugality in my habits, that I had renounced the society of all my former companions, and had learned to hate dissipation as much as, I am sorry to say, I once loved it. Mrs. Baines was pleased to speak in terms of cordial approval, and with a motherly kind of interest, too, relative to my altered conduct. I then came to the point, and asked her if she did not think that I should do well to marry — Ah! you have dropped your work. Permit me."

Ariadne had indeed let her work fall, and as she stooped to pick it up, her cheeks, which were burning with blushes, for a moment came in contact with the cheek of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had also stooped for the same purpose. She, however, was the first to snatch up the work, over which her head was immediately bent much lower than before, as if she were trying hard to conceal her countenance as much as possible.

"Well," continued the baronet, not taking any notice —

at least in words — of that transient contact of his cheek against hers, "on asking Mrs. Baines's advice relative to marriage, she at once declared it was the best step I could possibly take, and she reminded me that of her own accord she had volunteered similar advice some months ago. I bade her observe that if a Lady Huntingdon were introduced into my household, her authority as housekeeper might perhaps be diminished, but she at once declared that she would risk such an eventuality as that. In short, the worthy woman assured me it was her conviction that my happiness would be best consulted by means of marriage, and that if the lady on whom I might fix did not wish to retain a housekeeper, she (Mrs. Baines) would cheerfully resign her post. Now what do you think of that, Ariadne — Miss Varian, I mean?"

"I think," responded the damsel, in a voice that was very low and very tremulous, and she spoke, too, without raising her head, "that Mrs. Baines has acted in a most disinterested manner, but only as I should have expected she would have done, from what I know of her."

"And now tell me, Miss Ariadne," continued the baronet, "would you also advise me to marry? You do not answer. I must admit that it is a somewhat singular question, or it may appear so, at least, but do tell me if you think that I am capable of ensuring the happiness of any young lady whom I may love?"

"Yes, if you sincerely love her," replied Ariadne; and now the stitches she was making were a thousand times worse than ever.

"I do love her, I have long loved her," exclaimed the baronet. "And now I am resolved to offer her my hand and lay my fortune at her feet. Ariadne, dearest Ariadne, you know whom I mean. Will you be mine?"

Again the work was dropped in the same kind of confusion as before, but this time neither of them stooped to pick it up, for the baronet caught the blushing girl in his arms and strained her to his breast. That she did not immediately disengage herself was a sufficient proof that she accepted his love and loved him in return.

When the brother came back from the City, he found the baronet and Ariadne seated near the window shaded by the Venetian blind, and while there was the radiance of

honest joy upon the countenance of the former, there was the telltale blush of a virgin's happy love upon the cheeks of the latter.

"Theodore," Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately said, "while you have been to the City to find a situation, I have found an angel to become my wife. Ariadne has listened to my honourable proposals, and unless you say nay, has consented to become Lady Huntingdon."

"Noblest-hearted and most generous of men!" exclaimed Theodore, seizing the baronet's hand and wringing it with violence in the enthusiasm of his feelings, "how can I ever express my gratitude for what you have done? Ariadne, my beloved sister, sincerely, oh, most sincerely do I congratulate you upon having gained the affections of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. It is not a mere subordinate situation on the Continent which he has procured me; it is the chief management of that branch house which I fancied I was to enter as clerk, and it is an income not of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, but of four hundred a year that I am to receive. Nor is this all. Our benefactor, your future husband, Ariadne, has given security on my behalf in the amount of five thousand pounds to Mr. Chapman. Oh, never was generosity more noble than this!"

Ariadne could not give utterance to a word. She was well-nigh overpowered by her feelings, but taking Sir Douglas Huntingdon's hand, she pressed it to her lips, and that action on her part was ten thousand times more eloquent than all the powers of speech could have been.

It was a happy little party of three that sat down that afternoon to the dinner-table in the parlour of the cottage at Islington, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon perhaps never enjoyed a bliss more real, more sincere, or more satisfactory in all his life. Reader, he did not take his departure that evening until he had received from Ariadne's lips her assent that the bridal should be celebrated at the expiration of three weeks, so that her brother, who was compelled to leave England shortly, might be present at it.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DOCTOR DUPONT'S ESTABLISHMENT

At a distance of about two miles from Geneva there stood a large white building upon the slope of an eminence, situated in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, and commanding a beautiful view of Lake Leman. Those pleasure-grounds were surrounded by a very high wall, and the iron gates at the entrance-lodge were always kept carefully shut, opening only for the purpose of egress or ingress. The mansion had evidently been enlarged at different times, and seemed far too extensive for the private residence of even a family possessing enormous wealth. In short, this establishment of which we are speaking was a private lunatic asylum.

In one of the many chambers which the establishment contained two young ladies were seated near the barred window, gazing vacantly forth upon the prospect without. They were well dressed, and the chamber itself was handsomely furnished. Vases of flowers made the air fragrant, fruits and decanters of crystal water were upon the central table. There were musical instruments, books, and pictures scattered about, but in no unseemly disorder; and an alcove, or very large recess at one extremity of the apartment, contained three couches. Near the door an elderly female, stout in person and very strongly built, was seated. She was engaged in reading a book, but from time to time she glanced toward the two young ladies at the window, evidently to observe what they were doing.

The reader has doubtless already guessed that the two young ladies referred to were Agatha and Julia Owen. Through the generosity of the Princess of Wales, who had not merely studied, but likewise practised the divine maxim

of " Forget and forgive," they had been removed from the common madhouse in the Genevese prison to this private asylum, which was kept by one of the most humane and enlightened physicians of the age. Doctor Dupont, a Frenchman by birth, was the proprietor of this establishment, and having all his life studied psychological subjects, he had adopted a régime of mild and indulgent treatment toward his patients, instead of the old system of coercion and cruelty. The consequence was that the strait-waistcoat was seldom used within the walls of this asylum, and as for blows or corporal punishment, such atrocities were never dreamed of. There were two departments, one for males, and the other for females, and these were subdivided into many chambers, to suit the various degrees of insanity by which the patients were affected, and also any other circumstances of their position. Thus, in the case of the two sisters, one chamber was assigned to them both, and their guardian, the stout woman reading near the door, was ever in attendance upon them. In short, this female keeper acted alike as servant and custodian, waiting upon the young ladies at their meals, following them when they walked in the pleasure-grounds, and sleeping in the middle bed at night.

When Agatha and Julia were first brought to Doctor Dupont's asylum, they were in a perfectly rabid state of insanity, but the results of kind and humane treatment soon made themselves manifest; and now, at the expiration of six weeks from the date of their admission, we find the two unhappy young ladies in a comparatively composed and tranquil condition. Not that their minds had recovered their healthy equilibrium, or that their ideas were rescued from the whirl of confusion, but the savage instincts which had made them rave in maddened frenzy, and not only threaten their own lives but likewise the safety of all who approached them, were completely lulled down, and though still deprived of the light of reason, they at least appeared to be harmless.

They knew each other, and were, indeed, always together. Side by side did they constantly remain. If one rose from the window-seat and approached the table, the other would accompany her; whatever the one partook of, the other selected the same thing. Sometimes Agatha would sit down

at the piano and play some air, extemporaneously composed; immediately she quitted the music-stool, Julia would occupy it, and play precisely the same notes. The recollection of all the airs and musical pieces they had once known was utterly gone, but with the remarkable eccentricity of minds that are aberrated, they could thus remember what each other played at the time. It was the same with the books which lay about the room. If Agatha took up a volume, Julia would take up another; then when Agatha laid aside hers, Julia would take it up instead of her own, while Agatha would instantaneously possess herself of the one her sister had just laid down.

They awoke at the same hour in the morning, and without the interchange of a word seemed always to be simultaneously prompted by the same desire as to walking out in the pleasure-grounds, taking refreshments, or retiring to rest. In those two shattered minds there was a wondrous identity of thought and feeling; in those two bruised and almost broken hearts there seemed to exist a common inclination, an invariable oneness of purpose. They seldom spoke to each other, and when they did, it was in the language of the insane, giving utterance to wild rhapsodies and the strangest notions, and yet they always seemed to understand each other. They would sit for hours gazing forth from the windows with their eyes apparently riveted upon the same object in the distance, and yet Doctor Dupont's experience told him that on these occasions they were both alike gazing upon vacancy.

There would have been something deeply interesting, as well as touchingly pathetic, in the case of these two sisters, were it possible to divest the mind of that feeling of loathing and abhorrence which their profligacies and their wickedness were but too well calculated to engender. Indeed, all persons in the republic of Geneva who were aware of the past history of the two sisters, as developed during the trials of Mrs. Ranger and the three fishers of men, were astonished that the Princess of Wales should have shown so much generosity toward these young women who had entered with such direful purpose into the pay of her enemies, and the very fact of this excessive benevolence on the part of her Royal Highness was actually made a handle against her by those who had been led to think lightly of her character. In fact, this

unfortunate princess was always destined to suffer from the seeming imprudence of her generosities, her very virtues thus raising, as it were, the voice of accusation against her. So was it in the case of Bergami, whom through motives of goodness she took into her service, and so also was it now in the case of the two young ladies whom through the sincerest commiseration she placed at her own expense in Doctor Dupont's lunatic asylum. Suspicious people, and those who were fond of gossiping and scandal-mongering, shook their heads knowingly, saying, " After all, the princess must have done something in which these girls were her confidantes, otherwise she would not now provide for them so handsomely. But she doubtless fears that if she abandons them altogether, they would turn around upon her if ever they recovered their reason, and would proclaim all they knew.

But to continue our tale. It was, as we have already hinted, about six weeks from the admission of Agatha and Julia into the asylum, and about two months from the date of those dreadful deeds which closed in the fearful catastrophe of their sister Emma's murder, that we now peep into their chamber and behold them seated together at the window. It was the hour of noon, and the September sun was shining gloriously upon the wild expanse of scenery that embraced so many and such varied features of interest. There was the charming city of Geneva, there was that crescent-shaped inland sea, there were the eminences on the opposite shore, dotted with villages, farmhouses, and villas, and there, too, were the snow-capped Alpine heights in the distance. But the two young ladies beheld nought of all that interesting scene; their eyes were fixed upon vacancy, and there was nothing in their thoughts.

At the same time Mrs. Owen and Mary were wending their way from Geneva toward the lunatic asylum. A month had elapsed since they had arrived in the republican city, and each day they had called at Doctor Dupont's establishment to ascertain whether that gentleman would permit them to see Agatha and Julia. Hitherto, however, he had been compelled to interdict such a meeting, under the apprehension that it might tend most alarmingly to unsettle the minds of his patients. On the one hand, it was possible that Agatha and Julia might not recognize their

mother and sister, but, on the other hand, it was far more probable that they would, and were such the case, the treatment which Doctor Dupont was pursuing might be seriously interfered with. As a matter of course, Mrs. Owen and Mary had yielded to these representations, but, as we have already observed, day after day did they visit the asylum in the hope of receiving a favourable response.

"I have a presentiment," said Mary to her mother, as they approached the establishment on the occasion to which we are now specially referring, "that we are this day to behold my poor afflicted sisters," and as she gave utterance to these words the tears rained down her cheeks.

"Do not give way to your affliction in this manner," said Mrs. Owen, scarcely able to suppress her own convulsive sobs. "You unnerve me, you distract me."

"My dear mother, I cannot possibly control my grief," answered Mary. "Let us sit down for a few minutes upon this verdant bank, and endeavour to compose our feelings ere we proceed any farther."

The mother and daughter accordingly seated themselves beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree, and there they gave free vent to that bitter affliction which was rending their hearts.

It was by the side of the main road leading toward Dijon that they were thus seated, and so absorbed were they in their affliction that neither of them heard the sounds of approaching wheels until a post-chaise, coming from the direction of the French frontier and proceeding toward Geneva, was almost close up to the spot where they were seated. The occupant of the chaise was a young gentleman of genteel appearance and tolerably good-looking. He was, moreover, an Englishman, and as he happened to be gazing out of the window nearest to the two ladies at the time, he was immediately struck by observing them thus giving way to a grief which was evidently of no ordinary bitterness. He called out to the postilion to stop, and now Mrs. Owen and Mary sprang to their feet, hastily dried their tears, and were hurrying onward to escape the observation which they had thus so disagreeably attracted, when the traveller, leaping out of the chaise, accosted them with a salutation so courteous and words so polite as well as sympathetic that

it would have been an act of rudeness on their part to have avoided him altogether.

"Pardon me, ladies," said the young gentleman, in the English language, "but if I be not much mistaken in your appearance, you must be fellow countrywomen of mine, and if so, meeting you thus in a foreign land and seeing you plunged in such bitter grief, I cannot pursue my journey without asking if my services can be made in any way available for your benefit."

"On behalf of my daughter and myself," said Mrs. Owen, with all the courtesy of a thorough gentlewoman, "I return you my sincerest thanks for your kindness and generosity. But ours is an affliction which admits not of relief, even on the part of a friendly sympathizer."

"You will at all events, madam," said the young gentleman, "pardon my indiscretion for having intruded myself upon your notice? Believe me, it was through no impertinent curiosity."

"Such an assurance is altogether unnecessary," answered Mrs. Owen, "and considering the generous interest which you have thus manifested in our behalf, it would be at least discourteous, if not positively unhandsome, to evade an explanation of that grief which elicited your sympathy. Alas! sir, if you be a stranger in these parts, you are unaware that the immense establishment which you may observe on the slope of this eminence on the left hand is an asylum for those who have lost their reason."

"Ah! pardon me, madam," exclaimed the young Englishman, observing that Mrs. Owen stopped short in a convulsion of grief, and that Mary had turned aside to conceal the fresh outburst of affliction to which she was giving vent. "Instead of soothing you, I have forced you into explanations which only tend to revive your sorrow. I understand you, madam. You have some relative in that place?"

"I have, I have," answered Mrs. Owen, hysterically, and the unhappy woman wrung her hands. "Two daughters, this dear girl's sisters," and she pointed toward Mary.

"Enough, madam," said the Englishman, "dwell not upon the melancholy topic. And now, think me not indiscreet if I again observe that should I in any way be able to prove useful to you I shall be most happy. Had we met thus in our own native England, and under the same cir-

cumstances, I should not have stopped to make those inquiries upon which I have now ventured, but here, in a foreign country, it is different. This, madam, is my excuse for again proffering my services in any way that they could be made available."

"Once more do I return you my sincerest gratitude," answered Mrs. Owen, "but there is nothing that any human being can do to allay our affliction."

The young man made a low bow, and reëntered the post-chaise, which immediately drove on toward Geneva.

"Come, dearest Mary, let us proceed," said Mrs. Owen, as soon as this little incident had terminated. "Was it not kind of that young gentleman thus to display so much interest in our behalf?"

Mary gave her assent to the question, and, composing her feelings as well as she was able, accompanied her mother to the gate of the pleasure-grounds belonging to the asylum. The old porter, who immediately came forth from the lodge, and who knew both the ladies well from the circumstance of their calling every day during the past month, immediately said, "I have good news for you on this occasion. The doctor has given orders that if you call you are to be admitted."

"My presentiment was correct," whispered Mary to her mother. "I knew that we should see my poor sisters to-day."

"Now, for Heaven's sake, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen, when, having passed through the iron gates, they were proceeding up the wide carriage-way to the entrance of the asylum, "do your best to restrain your feelings in the presence of those whom we are about to see. We know not how pernicious may be the effects of any violent display of anguish on our parts."

"Mother, I will do my best," responded Mary, in an almost dying voice, "but the trial will be a severe one."

They now reached the handsome portico of the edifice, and were at once admitted into an elegantly furnished waiting-room which opened from the spacious entrance-hall. There they were speedily joined by Doctor Dupont, who was an old man with a kind and benevolent look, an air which though mild nevertheless proved him to be capable of great firmness, and also a most cheerful as well as winning voice.

"At last, ladies," he said, saluting them with the profound respect of true French politeness, "you are to see those in whom you are so deeply interested. Under my system of treatment they have been brought to the most satisfactory calmness of mind, and although it is impossible to foretell what effect a meeting with you may have upon them, yet I do not feel justified in excluding you any longer from their presence."

"But their reason, doctor, their reason?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "Think you that it will ever be restored?"

"Madam, I should not be doing my duty," was the grave response, "if I buoyed you up with hopes that may never be fulfilled. I am therefore bound to inform you," and he was about to draw her aside, so that Mary might not overhear what he was going to say, "that your daughters —"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, let there be no secrets with me," cried the young maiden. "Suspense under such circumstances were far less tolerable than a knowledge of the worst. Besides," she added, in a quick, hysterical tone of mental agony, "I already gather from your looks, Doctor Dupont, a presage of what is passing in your mind."

"Yes, you must speak it in my poor girl's presence," said Mrs. Owen.

"In that case," continued the physician, "it is my painful duty to inform you both that, from all the symptoms by which I am enabled to judge, I much fear that the minds of the two young ladies have received a shock from which they will never recover."

Mary said nothing, but clasped her hands despairingly, while Mrs. Owen turned aside, and sinking upon a chair, was for some minutes convulsed with grief.

"Now, my dear madam," said the doctor, at length breaking silence, "and you also, Miss Owen, I must beg and implore of you both to put as strong a restraint upon your feelings as possible. Remember, I am by no means certain as to the result of the interview which is about to take place. With all my experience I can foretell nothing upon that point. It may prove beneficial, or the very reverse; it may soothe, or it may excite. If my two fair patients recognize their mother and their sister, they will most probably melt into softness, and the effect would be advantageous; but, unfortunately, in these cases the very persons who ought to be

loved the most are sometimes regarded as the objects of sudden aversion, hatred, and terror. You will therefore both perceive the absolute necessity for exercising an authoritative command over yourselves at the approaching interview."

Mrs. Owen and Mary promised to follow Doctor Dupont's injunctions as well as they were able, and when he thought they were sufficiently tranquillized, he conducted them out of the waiting-room. They traversed the hall, ascended a magnificent marble staircase, and then proceeded along a carpeted passage having an array of doors on both sides. Presently they stopped at one near the end of the passage, and here the doctor paused, placing his finger upon his lip to remind Mrs. Owen and Mary of the injunctions he had given. He then knocked at the door, and it was almost immediately opened by the female custodian who had charge of the two young ladies. Doctor Dupont entered first, Mrs. Owen and Mary following close behind. The reader may imagine if he can, for we have no power to describe, the feelings which now swelled in the heart of that mother who knew that she herself was the primal cause of everything which had hurried on her two unhappy children to the catastrophe of a madhouse; nor can we depict the emotions which the innocent and tender-hearted Mary Owen felt at thus encountering her sisters in such a place and under such circumstances. The mother and daughter had wept over the tomb of the murdered Emma in the cemetery without the walls of Geneva, and deep as their anguish had been there, it assuredly was not more profound than that which they experienced in crossing the threshold of the chamber containing the living Agatha and Julia, but living only in a state of mental confusion.

The two objects of this visit were still seated at the window, still appearing to gaze forth upon the splendid scenery without, but still looking upon dull vacuity. They heard not the door open, or if they did, paid no attention to the circumstance. Doctor Dupont motioned with his hand for Mrs. Owen and Mary to remain near the door, while he accosted Agatha and Julia.

"Well, young ladies," he said, in his blandest, kindest, most soothing tones, "what is it that thus engages your attention?"

"Methought I beheld angels flying through the air," said Agatha, slowly turning her head and raising her eyes toward the physician's countenance. "They were all beautiful beings, with white wings shining as if made of silver, and they were dressed in azure garments which streamed out in a long train in the track of their feet."

"And I also beheld beautiful spirits passing through the air," said Julia, turning around with the same slowness of manner and gazing up with similar vacancy into the doctor's countenance. "I fancied also that they had beautiful silver wings, and azure robes spreading out into a cloud behind them — oh, it was wonderful!"

Mrs. Owen and Mary were now able to behold the countenances of Agatha and Julia, and hear their voices. Those countenances were so pale as to be devoid of all vital colouring, and those voices were so low, plaintive, and melancholy that it rent the hearts of the mother and sister to hear them. But still they subdued their feelings with a strength of mind that even astonished themselves; and now, at a signal from the physician, they slowly approached the window.

"Here are friends come to see you," said the doctor, his voice more gentle and more soothing than even at first; and yet both Mrs. Owen and Mary could perceive in his accents, as well as in his manner, that this was the crisis which he feared, — that is to say, the moment was now come when the effect of the visit would be immediately shown by his two unfortunate patients.

Agatha and Julia, at the same instant, in precisely the same manner, and as if in obedience to a feeling common to them both, slowly averted their looks from the doctor's countenance, and bent them upon Mrs. Owen and Mary. Then they both started, as if suddenly galvanized by the same electric wire, and also at the very selfsame moment; and still as if inspired by this singular identity of feeling or instinct, they sprang from their seats, shrieking forth, "It is Mary, our sister!"

Bounding toward the young damsel, they both wound their arms about her neck, covered her with fervid, even frenzied caresses, addressed to her the most passionately endearing epithets, and shed floods of tears. Then Agatha embraced Mary all to herself, and then Julia took her turn in the same demonstration of enthusiastic love.

"Oh, my sisters, my dearest, dearest sisters!" exclaimed the young damsel, giving back those fond caresses with an equal fondness.

"Come and sit down with us," said Agatha, "and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you."

"Yes, come and sit down with us," echoed Julia, "and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you."

"Dearest sisters," answered Mary, almost blinded by her tears and suffocated with her sobs, "here is our mother come to see you also."

"Yes, my poor girls, it is I, your mother, your almost heart-broken mother!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, rushing forward to embrace her two afflicted children.

"What, you our mother!" shrieked forth Agatha, her whole appearance changing with an awful suddenness, as if the spirit of a fiend had in a moment entered her frame. "No, no, not you our mother! You are a demoness, a she-devil, an old witch, a vile, monstrous hag! I know you well! Avaunt! avaunt!"

"No, no, you are not our mother!" were the thrilling echoes that now rang piercingly from the frenzied Julia's lips. "You are a demoness, a she-devil, a hideous hag. Avaunt! I know you well! Avaunt!"

And then the two sisters, taking each other's hand, stood side by side, as if in the reliance of mutual protection against that mother whom they did not recognize, but whose presence had thus so terribly excited them. As for Mrs. Owen herself, she covered her face with her hands, staggered back against the wall, and sobbed aloud, while poor Mary stood at a little distance, transfixed with horror and dismay.

"My dear young friends," said Doctor Dupont, accosting Agatha and Julia, "you have recognized your sister; are you not glad to see her? And will you not believe me when I assure you that the other lady is your mother?" he added, very slowly, and earnestly watching the looks of his patients.

"Our mother! — no, no!" again shrieked forth Agatha, all the frenzy of rage blazing up again in a moment. "I tell you she is not our mother! She is the old demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong."

"Yes, the demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong," were the terrible reverberations thrilling from Julia's lips.

"O God, have mercy upon me!" cried Mrs. Owen; and not observing the imperious signal which Doctor Dupont now suddenly made for her to withdraw, she sprang forward, threw herself upon her knees at the feet of her two lost and ruined children, and with wild looks and outstretched arms, shrieked forth, "Pardon me, pardon me, my deeply injured daughters! Forgive your miserable, miserable mother!"

Strange was the effect now suddenly produced upon Agatha and Julia. The expression of frenzied horror slowly faded away from their features, their eyes lost the maniac fires which they had ere now flashed forth, and the increasing placidity of their looks indicated a slowly returning tranquillity of mind. The doctor, who had been upon the point of ordering Mrs. Owen forth from the room, or even dragging her thence if she would not leave of her own accord, now watched with the deepest interest and attention this new phase in his two young patients' conduct, while Mary looked on with heightening hope in her bosom. Nor was even the stout female custodian indifferent to what was passing, and Mrs. Owen still remained upon her knees, while her two deeply wronged daughters were looking down upon her with a gradually increasing clearness and lucidity of gaze. There was something touchingly poetic and beautifully statuesque in the attitude which each of the two sisters took as thus, side by side and hand in hand, they stood with their eyes bent down on their parent's upturned countenance. And for more than a minute did this strange scene last, amidst a profound silence. The attitudes and looks of Agatha and Julia were identical; they were exactly the same, and it seemed as if it were but one mind influencing the two animated forms.

At length Agatha slowly raised her disengaged hand to her brow, to which she pressed it as if to collect or steady the thoughts that were agitating confusedly in her brain; and precisely at the same moment, and with the same slow gesture, did Julia raise also the hand which she had disengaged, and place it in a like manner to her white forehead.

Doctor Dupont flung a quick glance upon Mary and the female keeper, as if to intimate that this was the crisis upon which everything depended. And a crisis indeed it was, but one the turn of which was little foreseen by any individual present.

" O God, it is indeed our mother! " suddenly shrieked forth the two sisters, both at the same instant, and in blending tones of the wildest frenzy.

But the next instant Agatha staggered back, with a ghastly paleness suddenly seizing upon her, and fell heavily upon the carpet, the blood flowing from her lips.

" Great Heaven, she is dying! " shrieked the horror-stricken Mary, rushing toward her eldest sister.

" No, no, keep back, keep back! " screamed Julia, forcibly pushing Mary away; and then she threw herself upon the panting, convulsing form of Agatha.

All was now horror and distress on the part of Mrs. Owen and Mary, for it was but too clear that the unfortunate Agatha had burst a blood-vessel. The doctor and the female keeper forcibly removed Julia from the dying sister to whom she clung; but, oh, more horror, more distress, more terror and dismay! Was the blood on Julia's lips but the stain of that flowing from Agatha's mouth, or was it her own life-blood oozing forth from the fountains of a bursting heart?

The two sisters were speedily placed each on her respective couch, and all that human skill could do for them was performed by Doctor Dupont. Vain endeavour! The same excitement had produced in each the same effect, and both were dying. Mrs. Owen and Mary were well-nigh frenzied with grief. They first bent over one, then over the other, of those loved beings on whom death was laying its hand, and in the physician's looks they beheld no hope. Neither Agatha nor Julia spoke another word, but about twenty minutes after the bursting of the blood-vessels which sent the stream of life pouring from their lips, they made a movement, each upon her own couch, as if seeking to clasp something in their arms. By this action they turned themselves toward each other, and with a last expiring effort they stretched out their arms to one another. Then closing their eyes, they sank imperceptibly into that sleep from which on earth there is no awakening.

It was in the forenoon of the second day after this catastrophe that Mrs. Owen and Mary entered alone together into the chamber of death, and knelt down by the side of the couch on which the two dead sisters lay. They had both been placed upon the same bed, Doctor Dupont, with what

may be termed a poetic delicacy of sentiment, symbolizing in this arrangement that identity of feeling which had made the two sisters cling to each other from the first moment they had entered his asylum. There they lay, stretched out in the garments of the grave, the snowy whiteness of the shrouds being not whiter than the marble countenances of the dead girls. Yes, side by side they lay, like two alabaster statues carved upon the same monument.

Their features, fixed in the sleep of death, wore looks serene and placid. The world's cares ruffled them no more; the passions which had stirred their frail natures excited them no longer; they seemed, indeed, as if no other expression than that of innocence had ever been upon their faces. Life's storm had sunk into an utter lull beneath the palsying hand of death.

And by the side of that couch where the two sisters thus lay motionless and statue-like, side by side, knelt the mother and surviving sister. There was no passionate outpouring of frenzied affliction now, and the solemn silence of the chamber of death was broken only by the low, half-subdued, but not the less convulsing sobs which indicated the well-nigh suffocating grief of those anguished mourners. Long did they kneel there, by that bed on which the two departed girls lay stretched, and in the depths of their souls they prayed fervently and with a most unfeigned sincerity. Poor Mary had nought wherewith to reproach herself, but the mother, the wretched, miserable mother, had everything in the form of dire remorse to lacerate her heart. Then did she feel that in this world there may be condign punishment for wrongs perpetrated and sins committed, for her conscience was bitter and merciless indeed in its self-accusings.

They quitted the room at length, having taken a last long look at the countenances of the dead, those countenances to which they also pressed their lips. It was with slow and mournful pace, as if with leaden limbs dragged along painfully, that they thus issued from the chamber. But when they reached the passage outside, having noiselessly closed the door behind them, all the wildness of their grief burst forth, and for some minutes they leaned against the wall, weeping and sobbing, and giving vent to the most agonizing lamentations. Then they slowly passed away, and entering the hired vehicle

that was waiting for them at the gate, returned to their lodgings in Geneva.

Three days afterward the remains of the two sisters were consigned to the same grave where the murdered Emma already slept, but no pen can describe the paroxysm of mental anguish which the surviving sister and the miserable mother endured when they beheld the two coffins consigned to the last home of the dead ones.

LAKE LEMAN

Photogravure after painting by Stanfield.

LAKE LEMAN

Photogravure after painting by Stanfield.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LAKE LEMAN

A FEW days after the funeral, Mrs. Owen and Mary, attired in their deep mourning garments, embarked on board the packet-vessel which plied between Geneva and Lausanne. It was ten o'clock in the forenoon, and the weather was inclement and threatening. The sky was overcast with dark clouds, and a sombre gloom appeared to rest upon the slopes and eminences on the farther shore of the lake, thus giving a cheerless aspect to the scenery that in the sunshine was wont to be so fresh, so varied, and so beautiful. It was a small vessel, and there were but few passengers on board, but amongst them was one who surveyed Mrs. Owen and Mary with mingled interest and attention. This was the same young Englishman whom they had encountered a fortnight back, when on their way to Doctor Dupont's asylum. He saw that they were in mourning, and observed also the deep affliction that was expressed in their looks. He therefore naturally concluded that some calamity, greater even than any they had anticipated at the time he met them, had since occurred. But from motives of delicacy he did not like to obtrude himself upon their notice, and therefore from his station at a short distance on the deck he stood regarding them with mingled curiosity, interest, and commiseration.

The beauty of Mary, which was apparent despite the grief that consumed her at the time, had struck this young gentleman on the occasion when, alighting from his post-chaise, he had accosted her mother and herself on the highroad to Geneva, and more than once during the fortnight which had since elapsed had her image recurred to his mind. Notwithstanding the sympathy which her present appearance, in mourning and in visible grief, excited in his breast, this

feeling was not without a mingled sentiment of pleasure at beholding her again, and the longer he gazed upon her sweetly beautiful and pensive countenance, the deeper was the interest which he felt on her behalf. Presently it struck him that the captain of the vessel might happen to know who the young lady and her mother were; and as he had found, when first coming on board, that the captain happened to understand a little English, the young gentleman accosted him and made the inquiry concerning the two young ladies. The captain did happen to have learned who they were, for the whole transactions with which the name of Owen was so painfully associated had all along sustained a considerable excitement in Geneva. The captain therefore was enabled to gratify the young Englishman's curiosity, and as he himself had already heard much of what related to the unfortunate affairs wherein the name of Owen was mixed up (save and except the death of the two sisters themselves), his interest in the lady and her daughter was still more excited than at first. He now, however, learned from the captain's lips that the two girls, Agatha and Julia, whose names had been so unfortunately blended with the horrible occurrences at Geneva, had recently died, and therefore the reason of the mother's and surviving sister's mourning weeds was now no longer an enigma.

The passage from Geneva to Lausanne is not a long one, the distance by water being scarcely thirty miles, and at the expiration of three hours the port of destination was nearly reached. During this interval Mrs. Owen and Mary had remained seated on the spot where they had placed themselves when first embarking, and being the whole time engaged either with their mournful reflections or else in the melancholy discourse to which those thoughts led, they took no notice of any of their fellow passengers. They therefore had not perceived the young Englishman on board, and Mary little suspected she was the object of so much sympathy and interest. Nor had they even observed that the aspect of the heavens had been gradually getting more dark and menacing, and the waters of the lake more troubled. Suddenly the clumsily built vessel began to toss and heave in a manner that all in a moment produced a perfect consternation on board. Several of the passengers were thrown off their feet, and two or three narrowly escaped being

pitched over the bulwarks. The women screamed, the men gave vent to ejaculations of alarm, and the captain issued his orders to the sailors with a rapidity of utterance and a vehemence of gesticulation which fully proved his conviction that some danger was imminent. Mrs. Owen and Mary were startled from their mournful reveries, and they flung anxious looks around to ascertain the cause of the sudden alarm and the peril which occasioned it. An individual at once sprang to their side, earnestly bidding them hold fast to the back of the seat, which was fixed upon the deck, and they immediately recognized the young Englishman who had shown so much politeness and sympathy toward them on a former occasion.

He himself, being a stranger in Switzerland, was altogether unacquainted with the nature of the impending danger, but we may as well at once explain it to our readers. Lake Leman is at certain seasons of the year subject to a sudden agitation of its surface produced by subaqueous winds, these winds blowing with much violence from the depths of the lake, and stirring up the mass of water into high and dangerous billows. Whenever this phenomenon discloses itself, squalls from the south usually follow without much loss of time, and these often sweep with terrific fury over that inland sea. It was to guard against the effects of any abruptly arising gust that the captain had issued such quick orders and with such vehement gesticulation, so that the sails might be furled, the topmasts struck, and every precaution adopted against whatever emergency should arise.

Nor was the danger long in manifesting itself with frightful reality. For while the clumsy vessel was tossing and pitching on the upheaving billows, the clouds above the mountains of Savoy, far away to the south, seemed suddenly to part in twain, and then the next moment, or, indeed, quick as the eye can wink, the wildly gushing blast swept with terrific violence over the surface of the lake. Immediately the packet-ship heeled over and fell completely on its broadside, the top of the mast touching the water. Terrific cries and piercing shrieks rent the air, and in a moment nearly every soul on board was struggling in the lake, battling for life amidst the waves. The careering billows seemed rushing madly on, dashing over the sinking ship, and then suddenly

merging into one vast whirlpool, in which the drowning and the swimming were for a few instants swept around and around as if they were mere straws upon the surging eddies. The captain and the sailors had alone managed to cling fast to the ship at the instant she went over, but they were now fighting for their own lives amidst the dangers of the wreck and against the fury of the storm, so that they were unable, even if willing, to render any assistance to the passengers.

The catastrophe was witnessed from the shore at the foot of the eminence on which Lausanne is built, and two or three boats speedily put off. But in the meantime the greater number of the passengers, men and women, had been engulfed in the depths of that boiling lake, and amongst them was Mrs. Owen. Mary was however caught in the arms of one who swam with strength and expertness, and encumbered though he were by the fair object of his solicitude, it nevertheless seemed as if he acquired additional energy from the feeling of responsibility that her life as well as his own depended upon his coolness, his presence of mind, and the exertions he might make. Fortunately Mary was insensible, and thus she marred not his progress, nor increased the danger of both their predicaments by wildly clinging to him, as she would instinctively have done if in full possession of her senses. Sustaining her in one arm, he struck out with the other, his eye fixed upon the nearest boat that was approaching from the Lausanne shore; and luckily, when the violence of the gust had expended itself, the waves ceased to break in surges around him, but rolled only in a long, continuous swell. To be brief, he succeeded in meeting the boat, into which his inanimate charge was first lifted by the two fishermen who rowed the little bark, and in a few moments he also was in safety.

The packet-vessel went down, causing a fresh whirlpool and then a heavy swell, but the captain, together with his sailors and some eight or ten of the passengers, including three or four women, were rescued from a watery grave by the boats which had put off. Full of an intense anxiety was the glance which the young Englishman flung around upon the survivors of the catastrophe when all who could be saved were saved and safe in the boats, but amongst them he beheld not Mrs. Owen, and he therefore knew, as indeed he had already suspected, that she was amongst the missing.

Before the boats reached the landing-place on the Lausanne shore, Mary awoke to life, and as her senses returned, accompanied with painful sensations and short, convulsive gaspings, the light of memory also burned up again. It was with a strange and startling suddenness that she sprang up from the half-embrace in which the young Englishman held her, and threw a wild glance around. The other boats were close by that in which she and her companion were, and with one brief, sweeping look did she learn the worst. Her mother was not to be seen. Then she flung her horrified glance upon the Englishman, and in his countenance she read the fatal confirmation of the truth. Her mother was gone, and not more piercing was any shriek that had ascended up to Heaven from the engulfed passengers at the moment the vessel upset than was the wild scream which now thrilled forth from the lips of the orphan girl. But while it was still vibrating in the air, she fell suddenly, deprived of consciousness, as if stricken by a thunderbolt, and was caught in the arms of him who had saved her from the waters of Lake Leman.

When she again recovered her senses, she found herself lying in a bed in a well-furnished room, with a physician and a nurse by the side of the couch. She was in a hotel at Lausanne, whither the young Englishman had borne her, and where he had surrounded her with all the requisite attentions. But on thus reawakening to consciousness, poor Mary felt that she had better have perished in Lake Leman than have been rescued only to experience the orphan's fate. Her grief for the loss of her mother knew no bounds, and she seemed beyond all consolation.

Thus three or four days passed, but at length the violence of her anguish diminished, not because she felt less than at first, but because she perceived the necessity of resigning herself to the will of Heaven. Moreover, the thought gradually stole into her mind that the more she gave way to her affliction, the longer would she remain dependent upon the kindness of the generous-hearted friend who had not merely saved her life, but was continuing to manifest so sincere an interest in her behalf. There was another reason, too, which urged her to summon all her fortitude to her aid, and this was the discovery of her mother's corpse, which, together with those of several of the other unfortunate pas-

sengers, had been washed ashore. Accordingly, on the fourth day after the catastrophe, Mary quitted her chamber, and now she met her kind friend for the first time since she had been borne to the hotel. We will not pause to detail the terms in which she expressed her gratitude to this young gentleman. Suffice it to say, that even in the depth of her affliction, he discovered traits in her character which riveted the sympathy he had previously experienced in her behalf, and convinced him she was altogether very different in conduct and in principles from her three unfortunate sisters who lay buried in the cemetery at Geneva. On the present occasion, also, was it that Mary for the first time learned the name of the Englishman, and this name was Theodore Varian.

In the most delicate manner did Theodore beseech Mary to entrust him with the superintendence of her mother's funeral, and the poor girl was too grateful for the offer not to yield a ready assent. When the obsequies were over, her mind speedily recovered much of its former firmness of tone; for when she was enabled to sit down and reflect, in the solitude of her own chamber, upon the catastrophe which had left her an orphan in the wide world, the conviction insensibly grew upon her that, after all, it might be a humane and wise dispensation of Providence. For how could Mrs. Owen have ever enjoyed an hour's tranquillity upon earth again, after the frightful tragedies which had deprived her of her three eldest daughters? As for happiness, that never could have been her lot, and to have lingered on a miserable existence, dragging herself, as it were, over the thorny pathways of remorse, oh, such a fate would have been awful indeed!

It was such a train of meditations as these which led poor Mary to accept with resigned feeling her own orphan destiny, and the longer she reflected thereon, the more serene grew her martyrized mind. But now what course was she to adopt? The boxes containing her clothes and the money which her mother had brought with her from England had been engulfed in the lake, but the generosity of Theodore Varian, delicately exercised through the medium of the landlady of the hotel, had not only furnished Mary with all the funds requisite for the refitting of her wardrobe, but likewise for the disbursement of the funeral charges and the

hotel expenses. Even to the doctor's fees and the nurse's wages, everything was liquidated. Of course it was neither consistent with Mary's sense of delicacy or good feeling to continue dependent upon the young Englishman any longer than her circumstances rendered necessary. But whither should she go? What should she do? Her eyes were naturally directed toward England, where her aunt, Miss Stanley, would, she knew full well, receive her with open arms, and where she was sure of experiencing a cordial welcome and sweet sympathy from her cousins Lady Sackville and the beautiful Louisa.

She accordingly took an early opportunity of making Theodore Varian acquainted with her intentions, which he, of course, could not possibly oppose. When she had done speaking, he gazed upon her pale but beautiful countenance with a look of tender interest and admiration, and then, taking her hand, he spoke in the following manner:

" Miss Owen, we are about to part, and you will forgive me if under the very peculiar circumstances of the case I address you in language which, in the afflicted state of your mind, only such circumstances as those to which I have alluded could possibly warrant. We must not regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few days. All that has happened has tended to level the formalities of months and years, and to make us friends. But there is a still more tender feeling than even friendship in my heart, and if your affections were previously disengaged, perhaps when you have leisure and inclination to reflect upon what I now say you will write to me from England and tell me candidly and frankly whether you think that by accepting me as your husband you will be contributing to your own happiness. I seek no answer now; very far am I from pressing you for one. Nothing, I repeat, but the peculiar circumstances under which we have met and under which we are about to part could justify me in even making this avowal of attachment, when all your griefs are fresh in your soul."

Theodore paused, and though Mary spoke not, but looked down with tearful eyes, yet the blush which rose to her cheeks, and the trembling of her hand which she suffered to remain in his own, gave him the gratifying assurance that his suit was not rejected.

" I am established in Geneva," he said, " as the manager

of a mercantile emporium connected with a great commercial firm in London. It was business relating to my affairs at Geneva which made me a passenger to Lausanne on board the ill-fated packet the other day. I shall return to Geneva immediately I have seen you safe on your journey away from Lausanne. My address at Geneva I shall beg leave to place in your hands, and pardon me, pardon me, if I say that the days and the weeks will be counted with some degree of anxiety and suspense until I receive a letter from you. You tell me that you are going to seek an asylum with kind relatives whom you have in England. I also have a very dear, dear relative in our native land, a sister, who has recently been married to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. They reside in London, and should unforeseen circumstances place you in a position to desire a home with an affectionate friend, my sister Ariadne will receive you with open arms, for my sake. You will allow me to give you a letter to Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon; it may be serviceable."

"Mr. Varian," answered Mary, now at length breaking silence, but speaking in a voice which showed how deeply she was moved by the kind language, the delicate manner, and at the same time the frank avowal of Theodore, "in the same way that peculiar circumstances have led you to address me in terms which are not only flattering but also deserve my sincerest gratitude, so must I be held exonerated from indiscretion if I respond with equal candour. You have saved my life; it is a life, then, that I owe you. But you have not only saved this life of mine, you have done all that a generous friend could do to make it tolerable in the first hours and days of my bitter anguish. I feel, oh, I feel the immensity of the obligation which I owe you; yes, and I feel also," she added, her voice sinking until it became scarcely audible with mingled confusion and deeply stirred emotion, "that it would give me happiness to be permitted to devote my life to the study of yours. Mr. Varian, I will write to you as soon as I reach England, and — and —. Need I say more?"

"No, no, I ask you to say no more," exclaimed Varian, now delighted with the certainty that not merely his suit was accepted, but that he might even rely upon possessing the young maiden's love when time should have mellowed her grief sufficiently to allow room in her heart for the more

tender sentiment. Then quickly moderating, or, rather, controlling the enthusiasm of his joy, any prolongation of which would be, he delicately felt, unsuitable to Mary's position after the severe losses of sisters and mother which she had so recently sustained, he said, " But before we separate there is one circumstance of my life which in all honourable frankness I am bound to explain; and if after hearing my recital," he continued, in a voice that gradually grew desponding, " you should wish to recall anything that I may have construed into approval of my suit, do so, do so, although you would leave me wretched indeed."

Mary gazed upon him in surprise, but though she said nothing, her hand still lingered in his own, and therefore he went on. The reader has already divined what statement it was that Theodore Varian had to make. It was the narrative of those circumstances which had led to his temporary imprisonment in Newgate, his trial, his condemnation, his escape, and his pardon. But as he continued to speak, explaining how, for his sister Ariadne's sake, he had been guilty at the time of those little defalcations which had produced all his misfortunes, he saw the young damsel's eyes again filling with tears, but her looks beaming through with a deepening sympathy, and the cloud of apprehension was rapidly dissipated from his mind.

When he had brought his tale to a conclusion, Mary said, in a low, trembling voice, " Mr. Varian, Theodore, you need not wait for the first letter which I shall write to you from England for the assurance that in due time I will become your wife. No, I give you that promise now; and the life which you have saved shall be devoted to efface from your mind the memory of all your past misfortunes."

Theodore Varian raised to his lips the hand which trembled in his own, and this was the happiest moment of his life. Half an hour afterward the post-chaise which he had ordered for Mary's accommodation drove up to the door of the hotel, and as he presented her with a pocketbook containing her passport, he delicately intimated that she would likewise find therein the funds requisite for her journey back to England.

They then parted, and while the post-chaise rolled rapidly away in one direction, Theodore Varian proceeded in another conveyance and by another road back to Geneva.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE DELICATE COMMISSION

It was about half-past eight o'clock in the evening, and the prince regent was alone in one of the private apartments of Carlton House, awaiting with some little degree of anxiety the arrival of a person whom he was expecting. Presently his confidential valet Germain made his appearance, introducing a female enveloped in a handsome cloak and with a veil drawn over her features. The valet retired, and the prince regent motioned his visitress to be seated, an invitation which she accepted with some degree of awkward diffidence, as if she felt rather uncomfortable at being in the royal presence. But speedily recovering herself, for she was a woman of no small amount of assurance, she lifted her veil, and revealed a countenance so matronly and honest in look that his Royal Highness could not help exclaiming, "Why, there must be some mistake. You surely are not —"

"Mrs. Gale, of Soho Square, at your Royal Highness's service," responded the woman, assuming her blandest tone.

"Then that is all right," said the prince, flinging himself indolently upon a sofa. "But you know, my worthy creature," he continued, "one is apt to fancy that the peculiar calling or avocation of persons gives a certain impress to their features, and that one may judge of them thereby. I am a pretty good physiognomist, and if any dozen people were marshalled before me, I think I could pick out the cunning lawyer, the astute barrister, the sanctimonious parson, the self-sufficient pedagogue, and so forth. As for the female tribe, I grant you that the task of discrimination is a trifle more difficult, because they are such adepts at throwing the veil of hypocrisy over all their proceedings, as well

as over their thoughts, passions, and feelings. It is no ill compliment to you, but, on the contrary, a very delicate piece of flattery, to declare that from your personal appearance no one could possibly detect the pleasant and agreeable courses of life which you follow, and in which, from all I have heard, you are so admirably proficient."

"I feel honoured by your Royal Highness's remarks," returned Mrs. Gale. "As a matter of course, it was to put my abilities to the test that your Royal Highness has sent for me hither?"

"Just so," rejoined the prince. "Help yourself to a glass of wine there, Mrs. Gale, and listen while I proceed to explain myself. The truth is, I am devoured by what the French call ennui, and that is to say, there are no pleasures which now seem to give me any gratification. Some of the finest and handsomest women in the land have at different periods contributed to my happiness, but the handsomest and the finest of them all is gone, to return no more, and she has left a void which I am anxious to fill up. Now, I am wearied of what may be termed the facility of success. There is such a sameness in always triumphing the moment the overture is made or the proposal is whispered in the ear of the coveted fair one. As a matter of course, if I cast my eyes around the circle of my female acquaintance, my thoughts can settle upon many who would throw themselves into my arms at the first encouraging look I might give, but these are really no conquests. There is nothing in such amours to pique the passion, nothing to afford the imagination scope for luxurious revelling. Desires that are gratified immediately they are formed are sated, as it were, even before the moment of enjoyment; and thus all these gallantries with fair ones who surrender themselves up the instant they receive the first glance of encouragement are devoid of excitement, and seem stale, flat, and utterly destitute of pleasing novelty. In plain terms, Mrs. Gale, I want a change."

"And in what manner can I assist your Royal Highness?" asked the woman, "for amongst the various ladies of my acquaintance I cannot at the moment fix my eyes upon any whose virtue is not of the easy character you yourself have described."

"I will explain myself more fully, Mrs. Gale," resumed the prince. "I have already said that I long for some

charming novelty. It is now for you to devote a few days to seek after something of this sort. Endeavour to find out some lovely, elegant, and virtuous girl who not merely requires wooing, but even some more serious trouble, to the achievement of the conquest. I want excitement, Mrs. Gale, and yet at the same time the adventure must be a safe one, in order that there may be no chance of exposure. Don't think of the daughter of tradespeople, for instance. I can't bear the manners of the shop, and, moreover, the parents of such a girl would prove so mercenary in hushing up the affair that their demands upon my purse would be incessant. For the same reason don't fix upon the daughter of poor gentlefolks; but in order that the novelty may be altogether exciting and piquant, let the object of our enterprise be some fair scion of the aristocracy. There, now, I have given you a difficult task to accomplish. I want you, in a word, to find out a virtuous young lady, of noble family and exquisite beauty, whose purity is beyond all doubt, whose reputation is unblemished as the falling snow, and who will therefore require an immense deal of trouble to overcome. Have I explained myself sufficiently, and will you undertake this enterprise?"

"I not only understand your Royal Highness, but I accept the commission," answered Mrs. Gale. "At the same time, the task is indeed a difficult one, and there is a special stipulation I must make."

"Name it," said the prince.

"That if need be," rejoined the vile woman, "I may associate with me in this proceeding a certain lady of quality, with whom I am well acquainted, and who stands sufficiently high for her real character to be above suspicion. I do not think that without the assistance of such a person I alone could carry out the enterprise successfully."

"Follow your own course," answered the prince, "but mind that the utmost secrecy is observed. And I tell you what, it will be more conducive to the excitement and interest of the whole proceeding if, when you have found out the fair one who is to be the heroine of this adventure, you do not immediately let her know who is in the background. Suppose, for instance, you entice the fair one to some convenient dwelling-place, if a little way in the country so much the better; then you can tell her that she is the object of adoration

on the part of an individual of rank and wealth, and you will see how she takes it."

"So that your Royal Highness's name is not to be mentioned in the first instance?" said Mrs. Gale.

"I see that you understand me well," observed the prince. "Here are a couple of hundred guineas as a retaining fee, and, depend upon it, my liberality will be measured in proportion to the pleasure you procure for me from this adventure which we have sketched out and in which I am already anxious to plunge with all the frenzy of a new excitement.

Mrs. Gale received the money with a smiling countenance, and took her leave of the prince. It was now ten o'clock, but she did not consider the hour too late to take the first step in the business which had been entrusted to her. She accordingly proceeded at once to North Audley Street, and called at the mansion of Lady Lechmere. This lady, whose name the reader will recollect in connection with the Countess of Curzon, was at home and disengaged. It was not her night for receiving company, nor was she elsewhere at any fashionable reunion of her friends. Mrs. Gale, who was supposed by the domestics to be some benevolent gentlewoman through whose agency Lady Lechmere occasionally dispensed her charities, was at once admitted into the room where the mistress of the mansion was seated at the time.

Lady Lechmere was, as we have stated in an earlier chapter, a widow, on the shady side of forty. She had been a beauty in her younger days, and though inveterately profligate, had nevertheless contrived to preserve her reputation; and she still indulged in secret gallantries, but in a very guarded manner and through the agency of Mrs. Gale. She therefore received the infamous woman with a familiar friendliness, and bidding her sit down, inquired the object of her visit at such an hour. Thereupon Mrs. Gale described everything that had just taken place between herself and the prince, and Lady Lechmere listened with deep attention to the narrative.

"But now," said her ladyship, when it was concluded, "in what manner do you expect me to help you? For you cannot suppose that I will run any risk in aiding you to become the pander to the royal pleasures. No reward that he

could give me would compensate for the loss of position which would inevitably follow exposure. Being rich, I do not want money, and having already rank and title, there is nothing of that sort that his Royal Highness can bestow upon me."

"But if there be no risk of exposure," said Mrs. Gale, "will not your ladyship embark in the enterprise, merely to oblige the prince? Consider, though possessed of ample means as you are, and highly placed in society, yet still the special favour of him who is already as good as the sovereign and will some day be king of England is not to be despised."

"Granted," said Lady Lechmere, "but still I am not disposed to run any great risk for the sake of obtaining such favour. You however said just now that there was no peril of this kind to be apprehended. I do not see how you can guard against it."

"What I meant was that, suppose we find out such a young creature as the prince desires, when once she has succumbed to his advances will not she herself either be too proud of her new position, or, on the other hand, too anxious to avoid the exposure of her shame to publish to all the world the wiles and treacherous manœuvres adopted to throw her into the arms of the prince?"

"Your argument certainly looks feasible enough," said Lady Lechmere, now evidently wavering, "and if I were assured that there could be no risk, I should not mind lending myself to the service of his Royal Highness."

"Now your ladyship speaks wisely," observed Mrs. Gale. Then, after a moment's pause, she added, as she surveyed Lady Lechmere with a flattering look, "And who knows what may be the result? You are still very handsome, and of the age, too, of many ladies who have won and enjoyed the royal favour. Ah! my dear madam, suppose the prince took a fancy to you?"

"He might, it is true," muttered Lady Lechmere to herself. "More improbable things in this world have happened. Well, I will think more of it. Call again in a few days —"

"My dear lady, there is no time to wait," interrupted Mrs. Gale. "Those who intend to serve a prince well must serve him quickly. At all events, you can no doubt give me immediate advice as to the first step to be taken in this enterprise, and in so doing you will not endanger yourself.

Then, as to whether you will afterward proceed any further in the business is a subject that can stand over for your mature deliberation."

"In what respect, Mrs. Gale, do you need my succour at the moment?"

"In pointing me out some fair creature amongst your acquaintances whom we may regard as the heroine of this grand drama about to be played."

"Let me see, what did you tell me?" said Lady Lechmere, in a musing tone. "A young lady of noble family, spotless purity, stainless reputation, exquisite beauty, and who is by no means likely to jump at the prince's overtures, but full of coyness and shyness, — in short, a citadel that is to be attacked and must be able to resist a siege ere its surrender. Is not this what you require?"

"Exactly so," returned Mrs. Gale.

"Then, let me tell you that it is by no means easy to place one's finger upon a being combining all these qualities. If beauty alone were required, the circle of my acquaintance would no doubt furnish a whole bevy of such fair candidates for the royal favour. But, bless you, they would each and all surrender at the very first overture made by the prince. Perhaps, though," added Lady Lechmere, "we might let one of these fair creatures into the secret and teach her to simulate coyness and shyness —"

"No, that will not do," hastily interrupted Mrs. Gale. "The prince is as deep as a well and as cunning as a fox, and not for a minute would he be deceived by the substitution of artificial prudery for natural modesty. Besides, as he himself assured me, he is an excellent judge of physiognomy, and I have no doubt he is so well experienced in the female character that at the very first glance he can tell whether the blush that arises on beauty's cheek springs from an innate sense of artless delicacy or from any less refined sentiment. In a word, Lady Lechmere, it must be a young lady of genuine qualities whom we are to introduce to the prince."

"Ah, I have it!" suddenly ejaculated Lady Lechmere. "I know where there is exactly the exquisite creature who will suit the present purpose. My acquaintance with her is very slight indeed. I have been but once to the mansion of the noble relatives with whom she resides, but from the little I saw upon that occasion of the young lady to whom

I allude, and from all I have heard of her, she is the very being to answer the description you have given. Indeed, I question whether the prince would ever triumph over her at all, unless by downright violence or treachery."

"And I do really think it was something of that sort which his Royal Highness had in view," cried Mrs. Gale, "although he of course would not speak out too plainly upon the point. But who is this phœnix of perfection that you are speaking of?"

"She is engaged to be married, and is altogether so beautiful, so amiable, so innocent a creature," said Lady Lechmere, musing aloud, "that I should have some compunction in being the instrument of doing her a wrong."

"Oh, my dear lady, this is being too punctilious," ejaculated Mrs. Gale. "Come, now, if you will succour me in the present enterprise, I will promise to introduce you to a young gentleman who is as handsome as Apollo, as discreet as a Minister of State, and who will be delighted to engage in a tender intrigue with your ladyship."

Mrs. Gale then proceeded to delineate the most exciting picture of a perfect Adonis of masculine beauty, so that she speedily worked up Lady Lechmere's passions to an almost frenzied degree. We must, however, observe that the wily woman was entirely drawing upon her own imagination for this handsome youth whom she was so generously promising as a paramour for the licentious demirep. But Lady Lechmere put implicit faith in all that the procuress was saying, and though of an age when she ought to have been able to control the fury of her passions, yet did her looks betray the ravenous frenzy of the desires blazing up within her.

"Come to me to-morrow morning, soon after breakfast," she said to Mrs. Gale, "and we will talk more upon the subject. I must think over it for at least this night. Besides, amongst the circle of my acquaintance it is quite possible that I may think of some other fair creature who will better answer your purposes, and whom I should have less remorse in delivering over to the arms of the prince. Come, then, to-morrow, I repeat, as early as you like, and we will decide upon what is to be done."

Mrs. Gale was well pleased with this arrangement, and took her departure, congratulating herself that the ground was already cleared for the campaign which she had to conduct.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE DARK HOUR

In one of the most beautiful parts of Buckinghamshire stood Hallingham Hall, the country-seat of Lord Florimel. It was situated in a vale, with a limpid river meandering through the spacious grounds, and the slopes of the surrounding eminences presented a beautiful variety of landscape scenes.

Lord and Lady Florimel, together with their beautiful niece, Florence Eaton, had been staying for about a fortnight at Hallingham Hall, and at the expiration of this period they were joined by Sir Valentine Malvern, who was to pass a short time there previous to the nuptial ceremony that would make the lovely Florence his bride.

The young lady was naturally rejoiced to meet her intended husband again, for even the fortnight's separation had appeared quite an age, while, on his part, Sir Valentine was well pleased to observe that the fresh air of the country had already conduced to the restoration of the colour to the cheeks of Florence. For latterly, ere removing to Hallingham Hall, she had grown pale and melancholy, her looks denoting that a deep despondency was taking possession of her mind. It had been thought the change of air would prove beneficial alike to her health and spirits, and this hope on the part of the fond relatives and anxious lover seemed already to be in the course of complete fulfilment.

"My dearest Florence," said Valentine Malvern, one evening, when, a few days after his arrival, he and his intended were rambling together on the bank of the river which wound its way amidst the fields, like a long coiling snake of pellucid glass, "my dearest Florence, you know not how rejoiced I am to see you recovering your health

and spirits. Ah! my dear girl, I have passed many an unhappy hour during the last two months on your account."

"I know that such has been the case, Valentine," she replied, gazing with mournful tenderness up into his countenance as she clung to his arm, "and I can assure you that it has increased my sorrow when I have seen you thus anxious concerning me. Believe me, I have struggled to the utmost of my power to conceal the despondency that was gradually weighing me down, but, oh, it was so difficult to assume gaiety when the heart was heavy as if sinking with a weariness of life."

"But tell me, dear Florence, give me the assurance from your own lips, that you are happier now?" and Malvern gazed upon her with the most ardent devotion, the most affectionate interest, and the most tender love depicted in every lineament of his handsome features.

"I feel happier now that you are with me," answered Florence; and then it seemed to her lover as if she struggled with a great effort to subdue the sigh which nevertheless rose to her lips.

"Yes, but was I not also with you when in London?" he asked, in a mildly mournful voice, "and then were you not yielding to that despondency which caused your fond relatives and myself such cruel anxiety on your account?"

"Valentine, dear Valentine," she answered, "let us change the conversation."

"Heavens, you are weeping, Florence, you are weeping!" he exclaimed, as the pearly drops trickling down her cheeks gleamed in the rays of the descending sun. "Oh, what means this grief, this sorrow?"

"Do not ask me, dear Valentine," she said, pressing the arm to which her delicate hand clung, and her voice was now nearly suffocated with sobs. "You know full well all that must be passing in my mind."

"Oh, that fatal day!" ejaculated Malvern, bitterly, "that fatal day when your aunt took you to St. James's Palace!"

"And yet," murmured Florence, "it was the day which made us acquainted."

"True, and therefore I bless that day for one thing," cried Malvern. "In that respect it is the brightest day in my whole existence. But for other reasons it is a day to be

regretted. Florence, dear Florence, you are still weeping. Oh, tranquillize yourself, compose your feelings, put away these sorrowful memories from your mind, do, sweet girl, I implore you, I conjure you, not merely for my sake, but also for your own," and catching her in his arms, he strained the beauteous creature to his breast.

" Valentine," she murmured, as they resumed their walk together along the bank of the river, " you know that I love you with an affection as fond, as devoted, and as sincere as ever female heart could cherish, but not even the strength of all this love of mine can pour into my soul a flood of happiness potent enough to sweep away those desponding thoughts which, despite of myself, overshadow me at times and make me feel as if some evil were impending. Alas, Valentine, it was the hand of Heaven itself which so combined a variety of circumstances as to lead me on to the knowledge of the mystery of my birth, that mystery which my kind relatives had so long and so sedulously endeavoured to keep shrouded from my view. And oh, when I think of my poor mother's wrongs, — for wrongs she must have suffered, wrongs she must have endured, though I am but so partially acquainted with the tale as not to understand it all thoroughly, — yet, when I think of that poor dead mother's wrongs, it is enough to drive me mad," and the young maiden, stopping suddenly short and disengaging herself from her lover's arm, covered her face with her hands, and he beheld the tears trickling between her gloved fingers.

" Oh, Florence, dearest, dearest Florence, yield not thus to the influence of these bitter thoughts," exclaimed Valentine, himself almost frenzied with grief. " It is all my fault. It was I who made you a rash promise to help in solving the mystery which bewildered and afflicted you. It was I who went to the palace and sought an interview with the prince — "

" The prince, my father! " said Florence, suddenly interrupting him, and as she removed her hands at the same time from her countenance, he saw that it was deadly pale, and wore the expression of an anguish which, even had he not loved her so tenderly as he did, would still have been painful enough for him to behold on the countenance of one so beautiful, so young, so innocent.

" Florence, why speak you thus? Why look you thus? "

he asked, gazing on her with a sort of terror as well as grief. "There is a depth in your tone and there is an agonizing impress on your features which I cannot endure."

"Listen to me, dear Valentine," she said, again taking his arm and gently resuming her walk by his side on the bank of the river. "I feel that I must now give utterance to those thoughts which sit so heavy upon my soul. And if not to you, to whom else on earth should I breathe them? Listen, I say, and do not interrupt me. Though so little has been told me relative to the mystery of my birth, and that little so guardedly and so delicately imparted by my beloved relatives, yet can my imagination fill up all the gloomy shades and terrible voids of the picture. Alas, Valentine! that my mother, my dear, perished mother must have been pure and virtuous and innocent and good, I am confident, for is not my aunt Pauline so, and were they not sisters? Alas! then, she must have been deceived, she must have been betrayed; and who was the deceiver, who was the betrayer? He who holds upon my heart the claim of a father, he whom nature prompts me to love with a filial affection, but whom I cannot love — no, no, I cannot even think of him with respect, feeling confident, as I do, that he betrayed and deceived my too trusting, too loving mother.

"For a time, until I knew in what light the prince stood with regard to me, I experienced a yearning toward him; from the moment of that interview at St. James's Palace my sympathy was enlisted in his behalf, in a manner that often stirred my thoughts with an indescribable pathos and made me weep. But still all that was a feeling so very different from the one which I experience for you. Then, when the mystery of that yearning was cleared up, and I discovered that it was nature's voice appealing from the depths of my soul toward the author of my being, oh, what would I not have given to be enabled to love, revere, and venerate him as a daughter should love, revere, and venerate a father? But no, no, this happiness was not to be allowed me, for at the same time that I learned in what light he stood toward me did I become aware of my poor mother's unhappy love. Ah! her early death, a death no doubt caused by a broken heart, tells but too plainly the terrible tale of ruined hopes, blighted affections. And now you understand, Valentine, how hard it is, nay, more, how shocking it is, to be

compelled to think of my own father as the cause of my poor mother's premature death. There have been times when, gazing up at the canvas on which the countenance of that dear mother is preserved, I have felt my heart throb almost to bursting, and I have been so choked with a convulsing anguish that it has seemed as if the hand of death were upon me, and that I was about to join my perished parent in the grave."

Florence ceased, not because she had given utterance to all she had to say, but because her voice was now lost in a fresh outburst of anguish. Again did her lover snatch her to his breast, imprint upon her cheeks, her lips, and her brow the fondest caresses, and say everything he could to soothe, solace, and cheer her. By her looks he saw that she was deeply sensible of the sincerity of his love and the tenderness of his sympathy, but the dark hour was upon her, and she was a prey to a grief which admitted not of speedy consolation.

"Valentine," she continued, in a voice plaintively low and mournfully sweet, "I cannot help this tide of reflections rushing in upon my brain with an almost overwhelming effect. You will pardon me, you will forgive me, if I thus distress you, but these thoughts which fill me with grief are stronger than myself. For the first fortnight that I was at Hallingham I experienced a kind of relief in being afar from the same city which contains him whom I am bound in the secrecy of my heart to regard as my father, but whom, alas! I cannot love nor revere as such. Within the last two or three days, however, the gloominess of my thoughts has been slowly and steadily coming back. I have struggled against that growing despondency, I have battled with it as courageously, as resolutely, and as arduously as I could; yes, battled with it more for your sake than my own, because I would not afflict you. But this evening the cloud has settled again upon my soul with a weight and with a darkness which I could neither conceal nor shake off. Alas, alas! Valentine," she added, suddenly bursting forth into a passionate flood of weeping, "I am afraid that you will not consult your own happiness by espousing me."

"Heavens, Florence, speak not thus!" wildly exclaimed Malvern. "There is something dreadful in your words."

"Oh, do they sound like prophecy?" she asked, in a

frenzied manner. " Yes, yes, they do, for they are dictated by a presentiment."

" Florence, you distress me more than language can describe," said Malvern, a deep solemnity suddenly filling his looks, his voice, and his manner. " During the fortnight I was separated from you, being compelled to remain in London, as you are aware, to transact particular business in respect to my late father's affairs, my soul was gladdened by the cheering accounts which I received concerning you from Lord Florimel. I came down hither a few days ago, joyful in the thought that I should behold you restored to health and spirits. And this hope seemed to be confirmed. Several days have passed, I have watched you, oh, you know not with how intense and absorbing an interest, and each night, on retiring to my chamber, have I knelt down to return thanks to Heaven for this change which I believed to have been consummated in the condition of your health and the tone of your mind. This evening, when we came forth for our usual walk, I felt my heart so exultant, my joy so full of a soaring gratitude toward Heaven, that I could no longer prevent my lips from giving utterance to the words of congratulation toward yourself. Alas, alas! " continued Valentine, in deep despondency, " I now find that the cloud has returned to your soul, and that your thoughts are full of gloominess and pain. But believe me, Florence," he added, in a fervid manner, " that all the endeavours of my life shall be directed to the healing of this wounded soul of thine, my every study shall be to win you away from grief and foreboding, and to conjure up the smiles again to your sweet, angelic countenance."

" Your kindness touches me to the quick," faltered the pale but beauteous girl, " but, alas! I fear so deeply lest this morbid state of mind on my part, for such I know and feel it is, should cause you incessant affliction, whereas the object of marriage should be the promotion of the happiness of both."

" Florence, dear Florence, I beseech you not to talk thus," said Malvern, gently encircling her slender waist with his arm. " You are dearer to me than aught that the world possesses, and so must you ever remain. When I gaze on you and behold the looks of innocence beaming upon the lineaments of beauty, when I contemplate you as a being of an

etherealized order, it cuts me to the very soul to think that sorrow should have been able to fasten its vulture-talons upon such a heart as yours. But, oh, my beloved Florence, my angel, my darling, God is just, God is merciful, and there is not a bane in this world without its antidote, there is not a wound that can be inflicted for which no anodyne can be found. And you, my adored one, when surrounded by all the tender ministrations of the most enthusiastic love, when enshrined as the idol of my worship and my devotion, you, I say, sweet Florence, shall find that in such a love as this there is a soothing power even for the griefs that may have eaten most deeply into your soul."

Of her own accord the gentle maiden threw her arms around her lover's neck, and kissed him unasked. Then, as she thus clung to him, she drew back her head somewhat and gazed up into his countenance with a look of such fond, such ineffable affection, that it seemed as if the spirit of ethereal love itself were shining through her. At that moment, too, the last beams of the sinking sun shone upon her features, and as the reviving bliss of her heart sent up the roseate hue again to her cheeks, her countenance appeared radiant as that of an angel with the sunlight playing on it. The effect was heightened by the tear-drops which still stood upon her long lashes, and which glittered like diamonds, while the sweet, azure orbs themselves reflected the dancing light, and the rich tresses of her golden hair seemed to catch a burnished lustre from the same source, thus adding to the glory of her aspect.

"Oh, beauteous, beauteous Florence, thou art an angel and not a creature of this earth," cried the enraptured Malvern, as he strained her with impassioned vehemence to his breast.

His ear caught not the sigh which came up from the depths of the young maiden's soul as the presentiment struck her that, though she was indeed as yet a being of this world, yet it was written in the book of destiny that she should soon be an angel in heaven.

The lovers now resumed their walk along the bank of the river, and if Florence were not happier in her mind, at all events her despondency was less apparent than a few minutes back, for the excitement of the heart's feelings, aroused by those tender proofs of love on Valentine's part,

had recalled the colour to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes. But, ah, what means that loud cry which, suddenly ringing through the air, reaches their ears? They stop short, and Florence clings to Sir Valentine Malvern's arm, as if to prevent herself from sinking down beneath the weight of a vague but terrible presentiment which falls upon her.

Almost at the same instant a man is seen rushing toward them along the bank, having apparently emerged from a copse, or grove, which stretched down to the margin of the stream at a little distance.

"Help, for God's sake, help!" cried this individual, who seemed to be a labouring man. "Lord Florimel is drowning! Help, help!"

At those terrible words a wild shriek burst from the lips of Florence Eaton, and her senses immediately abandoning her, she would have fallen had not Valentine's arm sustained her.

"Help, help! quick, quick!" cried the individual who had given the alarm. "Come, or it will be too late."

Not another instant did Valentine hesitate how to act, but depositing the inanimate form of Florence upon the grass, which a sultry day had left perfectly free from dampness, he bounded in the track of the strange man, who guided him fleetly toward the copse just alluded to. But scarcely had the young baronet entered the grove when he was seized upon by three other men, wearing black masks over their countenances, and being altogether unprepared for such an attack, he was overpowered in an instant. Indeed, quick as thought strong cords were fastened to his hands and feet; he was then bound to a tree, and the three men, accompanied by the individual who had enticed him thither, rushed away in the direction where he had left Florence.

Notwithstanding the suddenness with which this outrage was accomplished, Valentine had demanded of the men what their object was, whom he had offended, and why he was thus treated? For he was at once convinced that they were not robbers, inasmuch as they exhibited no unnecessary violence in thus securing him, nor did they offer to plunder his person. But he could obtain no answer to the questions thus put, and the work being done effectually, though hurriedly, the men sped away, as already stated, leaving the

young baronet bound fast to the tree in the deep shade of the grove.

Desperate was the struggle he made to release himself, for the cruelest apprehensions now seized upon his mind in respect to Florence. But his efforts to escape from the bonds which secured him were altogether unavailing. Then he suddenly relinquished the attempt, and strained his eyes to penetrate through the shade of the grove and the deepening gloom of evening, so as to follow the men with his looks and watch their proceedings. But no, he could not, from the spot where he was thus bound, command a view of that place where he had left Florence lying upon the grass, and, well-nigh driven to frenzy, he shouted for help as loudly as he could. The echoes answered him, but no other voice responded. The darkness deepened, the passing minutes grew into an hour, and still was the unhappy young gentleman held fast in the captivity of his bonds. Again and again did he struggle with desperation to extricate himself; but no, the cords were stout, they had been tied with skilful hands, though the work was done rapidly, and it was a tree strong as a marble column to which the lover of Florence Eaton was thus held fast. Two, three, four hours passed, and, under the influence of terrible apprehensions, agonizing feelings, cruel uncertainties, and wildering conjectures, combined with the exhaustion produced by incessant but vainly renewed attempts to free himself from his bonds, Sir Valentine Malvern felt his physical and mental energies alike giving way.

Presently, some time past midnight, just as he was sinking down into that kind of languor which seemed to be the precursor of approaching death, he heard voices at a distance, and beheld the gleam of lights moving about to and fro along the bank of the river. Collecting all his energies, he cried out for help again, but his voice was so feeble that it was some time ere he could make himself heard. At length he succeeded, and then the lights all began advancing rapidly toward the grove, so that in a few moments he could perceive that they were torches which several men were carrying in their hands. Almost immediately afterward, Lord Florimel, attended by all the male domestics of his mansion, for these were the bearers of the torches, entered the grove, and their amazement may be better conceived than de-

scribed when they discovered Sir Valentine Malvern in that condition.

In the hurried manner of acute suspense he inquired concerning Florence, and then all his uncertainty was cleared up, all his terrible misgiving was confirmed, on hearing from Lord Florimel's lips that the young lady had not been seen since she went forth to walk before sunset with Sir Valentine. Indeed, it appeared that the prolonged and unaccountable absence of the two lovers had naturally filled the inmates of the hall with alarm; and as the hours passed away and they returned not, Lord Florimel had come forth, with all his male dependents, to examine the banks of the river, and ascertain if any traces of accident or misadventure might afford a clue to the mystery of this absence.

Being speedily emancipated from his bonds, and his strength somewhat recruited by a draught of brandy, which one of the men (a game-keeper) happened to have in a flask about his person, Sir Valentine related all that had occurred, and there could consequently be no longer any doubt as to the fact that some diabolical treachery had been played. In a word, it was clear enough that Florence had been carried off. The false alarm which had represented Lord Florimel to be drowning, was, of course, a heartless stratagem to separate Sir Valentine from Florence, and the reader has seen how well the trick succeeded.

But who could be the perpetrator of the outrage? This seemed to defy all conjecture. There was, however, no time to indulge in speculations and hypotheses upon the point, but Lord Florimel ordered his dependents to separate in all directions, and make inquiries amongst the peasants and country-people as to whether strangers had been seen, or a post-chaise or other vehicle observed, under any circumstances that might afford a clue to the solution of the mystery. In short, everything was done which could be possibly thought of at the time to get upon the track of the authors of this most unaccountable outrage.

CHAPTER XL

THE ABDUCTION

We left Florence Eaton lying in a state of unconsciousness upon the bank of the river. When she came to herself again, she was inside a vehicle along with two females. The carriage was tearing along at a tremendous rate, and in the dim, uncertain light which now prevailed the amazed and affrighted girl could distinguish no familiar features by the roadside so as to make her aware of the route which the equipage was pursuing, and it was only with indistinctness that she could perceive the countenances of the two females in whose company she thus found herself.

At first it struck her that she must be in a dream, and, closing her eyes, she pressed her hand to her brow to concentrate her reflections. But as all that had taken place on the bank of the river came rapidly back to her mind, and she remembered the alarming occurrence which had made her swoon in her lover's arms, she gave vent to a sudden cry of anguish, and forcibly catching the sleeve of the female who was seated next to her, she exclaimed, in a quick, hysterical tone, "My uncle — Lord Florimel — what has happened? Speak, speak!"

"Your uncle, my dear child," answered the female to whom she had addressed herself, and who by her voice, manner, and deportment Florence soon perceived to be a high-bred person — "your uncle, my dear child, is safe."

"Heaven be thanked!" cried Florence, a tremendous weight suddenly taken from her mind. "But whither am I going? Who are you? What means this rapid travelling? Oh, keep me not in suspense. Something terrible must have occurred, for all this can scarcely mean harm to myself."

"Fear nothing, and give way to no apprehensions,"

replied the lady who was seated next to Florence. "Everything that is being done is for your ultimate good. You are too much excited now for me to enter into any particulars, besides which, it is impossible to converse calmly and tranquilly while travelling at this rapid rate. In about an hour we shall be at our journey's end, and you may rely, Miss Eaton, upon the kindest treatment and the most delicate attentions."

"But who are you?" inquired Florence, both frightened and bewildered. "Surely if you are friendly disposed toward me you will not hesitate, even for a single instant, to say wherefore I am in your company? In short, what is the meaning of all this proceeding, so incomprehensible to me?"

"Know me as Mrs. Waldegrave," said the lady, "and this person," she added, in allusion to the other female who was seated opposite, "is my housekeeper, Mrs. Spencer. She is a kind-hearted and excellent woman, and will pay you all possible attention."

"You are both strange to me; I never even heard of you before," cried Florence, her misgivings increasing to the most poignant degree of anguish. "Why are you taking me away? Is it with the consent of my uncle and aunt? Where is Sir Valentine Malvern? Oh, speak, I conjure you. Keep me not in suspense. Has any harm befallen him?"

"No, nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Waldegrave. "You have nought, my dear child, to make you unhappy, much less fill you with alarm."

"Then, in one word," said Florence, all her courage and all her presence of mind appearing to concentrate themselves for a great effort in the present emergency of suspicion and doubt, "in one word, tell me what means this proceeding, or I will shriek forth from the carriage window for help."

"Miss Eaton, I cannot and will not explain myself at present," answered the lady who called herself Mrs. Waldegrave, and she spoke in a firm, decisive, and almost peremptory voice. "As for your threat of crying for help from the window, it were useless. The carriage is mine, the servants are mine, and you may rest assured that whatever their instructions are, they will obey them."

Florence Eaton said not another word, but sank back into the corner of the vehicle with a terrible sensation of wretched-

ness in her bosom. That she was the victim of some treachery was but too evident, but of what nature could this treachery be? Her soul was too guileless, her thoughts too pure, her acquaintance with the ways of the world too limited to enable her to form the natural conjecture which a female of larger experience would at once have done, namely, that it was for the most dishonourable of purposes she had thus been made the victim of a forcible abduction. Three or four times during the hour which elapsed after she had regained her consciousness did she beseech Mrs. Waldegrave to relieve her mind from suspense, but perceiving that it was in vain to question this lady, the unhappy girl gave way to her grief in floods of tears and bitter lamentations.

Presently the carriage stopped, while a servant got down from the box to open a gate leading into a large park, and then the equipage, turning into this enclosure, pursued its way up a wide gravel road to a spacious and handsome-looking mansion, at the principal entrance of which it stopped. The front door immediately opened, a couple of servants in rich liveries came forth, and Mrs. Waldegrave hastily whispered in Florence Eaton's ear, " For your own sake, make no appeal to my domestics, for they cannot, they dare not, disobey my orders, whatever those orders may be, and you would only expose yourself to a mortifying humiliation by appealing to them."

Florence Eaton felt so truly miserable that she had now neither spirits nor courage for anything, but descending mechanically from the carriage, she suffered herself to be conducted by Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer into the mansion. Lights were burning in the hall, which was spacious and lofty, with marble columns and splendid statues. Thence they ascended a wide and equally magnificent staircase, but Florence observed little of the specimens of sculpture or the porcelain vases which embellished the ascent. She was led on into a sumptuously furnished sitting-room, where a table was spread with refreshments, and Mrs. Waldegrave now pressed her to sit down and partake of the repast. The invitation seemed, all in a moment, to make the young lady sensible of the circumstances of her position; that is to say, she suddenly woke up from the confusion of her ideas, and, flinging a quick glance around, exclaimed, " This is no place with which I am familiar. Everything is

strange, as the countenances which meet my eyes. Tell me, then, once for all, where am I, and who are you? "

" My name I have already told you," said Mrs. Waldegrave. " I may now add that this is my house, where you will be a most welcome guest."

" Or a prisoner, a captive! " cried Florence, bitterly. Then, arming herself with all a young virgin's dignity, she said, " But no, it is scarcely possible that you can really mean outrage against me. You are yourself evidently a lady of wealth and position and respectability, and you can have no object in doing me harm. You also," added Florence, turning toward Mrs. Spencer, " are of an appearance far from calculated to inspire terror or foreboding. There is even something kind and benevolent in your looks. Then why am I here? "

As she asked herself this question, — for it was put in a musing manner to herself, though spoken aloud, — a pallor of a ghastly aspect suddenly overspread her countenance, and she staggered back, as if the idea which suddenly entered her head had struck her with the violence of a blow. Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer sprang forward to catch her in their arms, for they thought she was on the point of falling backward, but with an abrupt start and a wild cry, she shrieked forth, " No, no, keep off, do not come near me. You wish to put the strait-waistcoat on me, you think me mad. O heavens! you think me mad! " repeated the wretched girl, and, flinging herself upon a sofa, she burst into a flood of tears, wringing her hands bitterly.

Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer exchanged quick looks of amazement, as they all in a moment comprehended the nature of the idea which had thus suddenly taken possession of Florence Eaton.

" Oh, yes, yes, now I understand it all," again shrieked forth the poor girl, in the wildest paroxysms of anguish. " I have read in books how people are thus spirited away by strangers, and at night-time, thrust into carriages, and borne off to madhouses. But I am not mad. No, no, believe me, dear lady," she continued, throwing herself upon her knees at the feet of Mrs. Waldegrave, " I am not mad. Good heavens! is it possible that my uncle and my aunt, who have cherished me so tenderly, or that Valentine, who loves me so fondly, could have consigned me to the horrors

of a madhouse? Is it true that I have had strange thoughts and perhaps said strange things at times, but still I am not mad, no, not mad."

" Rise, rise, dear child," said Mrs. Waldegrave, in a soothing and conciliatory manner. " Take my advice, retire to rest, endeavour to sleep soundly, and to-morrow we will have some serious conversation together. Do not for a moment fancy that any harm will befall you."

" Well, I must trust in your kindness, then," said poor Florence, in a tone so deeply mournful and with a look so full of utter despair that any but the flintiest heart would have been moved by that spectacle of woe on the part of one so youthful, so innocent, so lovely.

She rose from her knees, slowly and painfully, and with a fixed look, in which there was nothing wild, but all blank hopelessness, while Mrs. Spencer intimated her readiness to conduct the young lady to a bedchamber. Florence followed her mechanically, and was escorted up-stairs to a room furnished in the most elegant manner. Mrs. Spencer asked if Miss Eaton would prefer sleeping alone, or whether she would like to have a lady's-maid as her companion. In reply to which Florence uttered the single word, " Alone," and then Mrs. Spencer, bidding her good night, issued from the chamber.

The young damsel sat herself down near the elegant toilet-table, but instead of making any preparations for retiring to rest, she fell into a deep reverie. As the reader has already seen, she fancied she had discovered the clue to all these proceedings which had at first filled her with so much uncertainty and alarm, and she began to revolve in her mind all that she had ever said or done within the last few months that could possibly have led her relations to imagine that her mind was unhinged. Poor girl! she soon began attaching importance to many, many comparatively trivial words and actions on her part, and as she pondered upon those intervals when the dark cloud had rested upon her soul, she could not help saying to herself, " Alas! perhaps it is indeed too true, and when I thought of my poor dead mother's wrongs, I might have looked and said such strange things that those about me fancied me mad."

She put her hand to her brow, and pressed it hard to her throbbing temples. Then, resting her elbow upon the toilet-

table, she sat perfectly motionless for several minutes, asking herself whether, in truth, her mind was unsettled, or whether she was the victim of a fearful misconception on the part of her relatives. Alas! this morbid state of feeling on her part was but too well calculated to unsettle her mind in reality, and make reason totter upon its throne.

All of a sudden she burst into a violent fit of weeping, and wringing her hands bitterly, exclaimed aloud, " Oh, Valentine, Valentine, you also thought me mad, and you must likewise have given your assent to my being brought hither."

At length, exhausted with the wearing and tearing excitement of her feelings, she laid aside her apparel, retired to rest, and speedily sank into a profound slumber.

When she awoke in the morning and reflected on all that had taken place on the previous night, she was more than ever convinced that the whole proceeding was dictated by the motives her imagination had suggested. She feared not ill-treatment in her present habitation, nor at the hands of those by whom she was surrounded, but she longed, oh, she deeply longed to go back to her relations whom she loved so well, and again to behold him who possessed the tenderest affections of her heart. But how was this happy consummation to be brought about? It naturally occurred to her that she could only be restored to her home and to her friends when her mind should no longer exhibit any of those morbid feelings which (as she fondly fancied) had led to her present position. She therefore resolved to exercise a rigid and stern control not only over all her words, but over all her thoughts, to study alike the discipline of her mind and the forms of her language, in a word, to do her best to convince those about her, in as short a time as possible, that she was thoroughly cured. Thus did the poor girl reason herself into the belief that her brain was actually touched by insanity, and that it was necessary for her to exert all her moral energies with a view to the reëstablishment of her complete mental health.

Having been led by the very artlessness of her nature to these conclusions, — for she was too guileless to suspect for a single instant that it was from dishonourable motives she had been snatched away from home and placed where she was, — she did not, of course, entertain the

slightest resentment against her uncle and aunt, nor against Valentine Malvern, for having (as she supposed) consigned her to a madhouse. She believed that they had only done what was absolutely necessary, and with the kindest intention toward herself. She even, therefore, more lovingly and tenderly than ever cherished their images, and, if possible, more devoutly prayed that Heaven would shower down the choicest blessings upon their heads.

Presently a neatly dressed young female, of interesting appearance, entered the chamber, announcing herself as the lady's-maid specially appointed to wait upon Miss Eaton. Florence received her with that amiable kindness which she was ever wont to display toward her inferiors, and the maid could not help thinking to herself that the young lady already seemed wonderfully resigned to all that had happened to her. By the time the process of the toilet was finished, Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance, and embracing Florence, she expressed her delight to find her so tranquillized in feeling and so comparatively well in looks. Florence gave a smiling answer, and even expressed herself grateful for the attentions with which she found herself surrounded. Mrs. Waldegrave then led her down to the breakfast-parlour, and though the young damsel ate but little, she nevertheless seemed in tolerably good spirits, and treated Mrs. Waldegrave with a sort of affectionate respect.

We must here pause to give some brief description of the mansion at which the present scenes are occurring. It was one of those old-fashioned country-seats which are principally to be met with in the agricultural districts, and which at the time of their erection were intended in all respects to suit the purposes and the conveniences of those country squires who farmed their own estates and lived from one year's end to another amongst their tenants without dreaming of " London seasons " or visits to fashionable watering-places. The mansion of which we are speaking was one of the kind alluded to. It was spacious, and possessed numerous outhouses, so that while in front it had all the appearance of a handsome country-house, in the rear it looked like an immense farm-homestead. The hall, the staircase, and some of the sitting-apartments had been completely modernized, by the aid of marble pillars, sculptured cornices, beautiful statues, carpets upon the oaken floors, and such

other arrangements as suited the fashionable tastes of the recent and present possessor of the mansion.

It was chiefly in the upper portion of the spacious building that its antiquated architecture and arrangements had been left untouched by the innovation of modern decorators, builders, carpenters, and upholsterers. The highest story consisted of a long passage, reaching from one end of the building to the other, and having on each side an array of doors numbered like those of an inn. Overhead, and just beneath the roof, was an immense loft, stretching likewise from one extremity of the building to the other, and this place in former times had served as a storeroom for the purposes of the thrifty housewife. But the shelves, racks, and frames where autumn fruits in those past times were wont to be kept, and where all kinds of garden-stuff, sweet herbs, and so forth, had been spread out with a careful hand for winter's use, were all empty now, and the immense loft no longer served for any purpose. However, the clumsy wooden crane, which in former times had been used to hoist up huge hampers of fruit, baskets of vegetables, sacks of potatoes, and all the products of the kitchen-garden that were wont to be stored, as above stated, in the immense loft, that huge crane, we say, was still there, but the door from which it had to be thrust forth when its services were required, and which, as the reader may understand, opened, as it were, upon an abyss, had remained shut up many long, long years.

Having thus glanced at the appearance of the mansion where the present scenes are passing, we shall now resume the thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XLI

THE FAIR CAPTIVE

A WEEK had passed since the forcible abduction of Florence Eaton, and during this interval the morbid condition of the young damsel's mind had experienced the pernicious influences of her captivity, as well as of the belief which she had formed in respect to its motive. When alone, she often and often carried her thoughts back to those days when she was blithe and happy, when nothing weighed upon her soul, and she knew not the name of care. This train of reflection naturally led her to date the altered state of her feelings from that fatal hour when she first beheld the prince regent at St. James's Palace, and she could not help, often and often, saying to herself, "Had I never known the prince, my father, I should be gay and happy now, as previously I was wont to be."

The result of these meditations was a strengthening of that feeling of pain and anguish which, ever since the discovery of her parentage, she had experienced when thinking of her father. We have heard her in sorrow and in grief make her unsophisticated plaint to Valentine Malvern, to the effect that she could not love, revere, and venerate the name of her father as a daughter should; but now, during this week of her captivity, she had been insensibly but irresistibly led on to regard that father's image not merely with pain, but with absolute aversion. She struggled against this sentiment so repugnant to her delicate appreciations of gentleness, kindness, and propriety, but it gained upon her, it grew stronger than herself, and she could not throw off its influence. Let us follow her for a little space, when thus carried on by the strong current of her reflections, and the reader will gain therefrom a deeper insight into the

mysterious changes that were operating in the soul of Florence Eaton.

"Can I any longer conceal from myself that the spell of an evil destiny is upon me? Why was I suffered, after the lapse of so many years, to penetrate the veil of mystery which had been so religiously kept hanging over my birth? My childhood had passed in blissful ignorance of everything calculated to draw down a cloud upon my soul; my girlhood had passed likewise in the same happy unconsciousness of all that lurked behind the veil; but when entering upon womanhood, the force of destiny suddenly manifested itself, and, as it was decreed that my eyes should be opened so as to scan the past, Heaven in its own inscrutable manner combined all the incidents that were to lead to this initiation. Thus the day which first brought me into the presence of my father likewise threw me in the way of Valentine, through whom it was decreed that the reading of the mystery was to be brought about. For had I not so earnestly besought him to clear it up for me, never would the secret have fallen from the lips of my uncle and my aunt.

"And then, what did I discover? That the prince, who at first had enlisted my sympathies, had been the cause, long years ago, of my poor mother's unhappiness and shame and premature death. And I have sought to love this father, but I cannot. No, if I endeavour to look lovingly on his image, that of my poor mother rises up before me in mournfulness, in sorrow, even with reproachful looks, and seems to remind me that I am endeavouring to love her murderer. O heavens! what thought is this which has sent a shudder through my entire being? That my father is a murderer, the murderer of my mother! Alas! when I conjure up that sweet and beauteous countenance whose lineaments are preserved upon the faithful canvas at my uncle's mansion in London, it seems that I must fall down and kneel to that image as if it were an angel's; and then, at the same moment, an obtruding shadow darkens my soul, and this shadow is the image of my father. Oh, Heaven send that I may never behold the prince again! For I feel, oh, I feel that I could not endure to gaze upon him, I could not approach him without feeling a cold tremor pass over me. I should fly from him, my God! I should fly from him, as if it were a spectre haunting me. His very image fills me with a pre-

sentiment of evil. Methinks that my fatal curiosity in seeking to penetrate the mystery of the past has already begun to draw down a terrible punishment upon my head, and that in the consummation of my unhappy destiny my own father is yet to bear a part."

But we will not follow the afflicted girl in those reflections to which she constantly found herself yielding, and from which she struggled to escape. Suffice it to say that the condition of her mind day by day grew more morbid, until she at length not merely contemplated the image of her father with pain and aversion, but even with a mortal terror. She would dream that the prince, in the shape of a hideous spectre, stood by her couch at night, and made threatening gestures with his outstretched arms above her head. Even in the middle of the day, in the broad sunlight, did she behold that image rising up before her, like a dark shade obstructing the beams which the glorious effulgence of noon was pouring in at the windows; and then she would pass her hand rapidly over her eyes, so that the phantom of her imagination would disappear ere the scream that rose to her lips found vent. Horror was thus taking possession of the mind of poor Florence Eaton.

But did not Mrs. Waldegrave perceive all this? No; for in pursuance of the resolve which the young damsel had made on the first morning of her captivity at the mansion, a resolve dictated by her earnest longing to be freed from a place which she fancied to be a madhouse, she maintained an aspect of outward calm, blended even with a certain degree of cheerfulness, that completely veiled the morbid condition of her mind. Heaven knows it was not with any sentiment of low cunning or any feeling of base duplicity that Florence practised this concealment. No, she was incapable of artifice, as the term is generally understood. Poor girl, she fancied that she had been placed there for the sake of her mental health, and that the more control she exercised over her inward feelings the sooner she would be restored to her friends, so that it was natural enough for her to imagine that by forcing herself to seem cheerful and gay she was putting a wholesome restraint upon the morbid action of her thoughts and was ministering to her own cure.

It was the eighth morning after the young lady's forcible

abduction that Mrs. Waldegrave, when breakfast was over, addressed the fair captive in the following manner:

"On the night of your arrival I intimated to you, my dear Miss Eaton, that on the ensuing day we would have some conversation together, but I have purposely postponed all such serious discourse until now, in order that you might have leisure to become completely reconciled to your present abode, and also that you might learn to know me better than the acquaintanceship of a few short hours could possibly have enabled you to do. Now, if you please, we will have this promised but deferred conversation."

"You may easily suppose, Mrs. Waldegrave," said Florence, endeavouring to still the beatings of that heart which was palpitating with suspense, "that I am deeply interested in the observations you have just made, and that I am glad you are about to converse with me upon any topic regarding my welfare, for to such do I conceive you have alluded."

"Listen, then, with attention and patience," said Mrs. Waldegrave, and, drawing her chair closer to where Florence was seated, she continued thus: "Young ladies of your age, innocence, and inexperience often imagine that they themselves are the best judges of their own happiness, and they fondly believe that, in order to ensure this happiness, they have only to follow the impulse of a particular sentiment, or yield to the influence of a feeling the greatest charm of which is its novelty. But real happiness, such as the world understands it, is not to be obtained in this manner. Fond relations, more indulgent than wise, will sometimes encourage young ladies to pursue the bent of their inclinations in the course to which I am alluding, and perhaps they do not err, so long as no prospects of a more brilliant character present themselves to the view. But sometimes when these brilliant prospects do present themselves, they are viewed with mistrust and suspicion, because the prejudices of an extreme refinement of morality are against them; yet, when regarded in a purely worldly point of view, the proceeding which they suggest should be looked upon as paramount above all other considerations. I do not know whether you catch my meaning?" observed Mrs. Waldegrave, as she noticed that Florence gazed upon her with a look of deepening perplexity and bewilderment.

"Frankly speaking," replied the young lady, "I cannot at all comprehend the nature of your remarks. If I were to read them in a book, I should consider them as forming a portion of some deep metaphysical essay altogether exceeding the limited range of my intellect."

"I will, then, become more explicit," said Mrs. Waldegrave, "and instead of speaking of young ladies generally, I will allude to your own case in particular. You have conceived an affection for Sir Valentine Malvern, and you believe that your happiness depends upon the fulfilment of the engagement existing between you. Your relatives have encouraged this attachment on your part, and they have sanctioned the projected union between yourself and Sir Valentine. Now, all this is very well as far as it goes, and belongs to the ordinary routine of life. But suppose that you suddenly found yourself marked out for the fulfilment of another destiny, and that you were called upon to renounce the imagined bliss of these spring-time hopes and first affections, suppose that you were made to understand that the career which in your artlessness you had chalked out for yourself is not the one which you are fated to pursue."

"Ah! I know, I feel," cried Florence, "how impossible it is to struggle against one's destiny. I have already had proofs of that. But surely you, madam, do not pretend to possess the key to the reading of the future as it regards myself? My fate is not in your hands, and Heaven cannot have whispered in your ear its intentions respecting me."

"No, my dear Florence," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, somewhat startled by the singularity of the young lady's observations, and not knowing precisely in what sense to read them, "I do not pretend to the gift of prophecy, and, believe me, that everything which I consider destined to occur to yourself may be foreshadowed without a miracle and will be accomplished by very natural means. But what I wish you to tell me is this: If it be possible to convince you that the basis upon which you have hitherto hoped to establish your happiness is not the true one, but that another, of a more solid and endurable character, and accompanied with circumstances of greater brilliancy and splendour, can be presented to your view, what would you say? What answer would you give? In what manner would you treat the proposition?"

Florence gazed upon Mrs. Waldegrave with a slight expression of anxiety in her countenance, as if she had caught a distant idea of the meaning which was buried within this cloud of sophistry and beneath this mass of words, but suddenly becoming profoundly grave, she said, in a low and mournful voice, "I do not dare for an instant imagine that you mean me any harm, or that you are capable of giving me bad counsel, but, at the same time, your words sink like a presentiment and a foreboding of evil into my heart."

"Perhaps I am not explicit enough yet," said Mrs. Waldegrave, feeling her way with the utmost caution.

"Do you — do you," falteringly asked the young maiden, "do you mean me to understand that I am to renounce the hope of ever becoming the wife of Sir Valentine Malvern?" and while a deep blush mantled upon her cheeks, the tears suddenly trickled forth from her eyes like an April shower moistening the leaves of the rose.

"I do mean," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "that if you were to consult your own happiness, you would put away the image of Sir Valentine Malvern from your heart."

"Why, oh, why?" demanded Florence, with mingled grief, indignation, and alarm. "Is it that I am no longer worthy of his love? Is it that you would have me love another? Or is it that he himself no longer loves me?"

"You, my dear child," answered Mrs. Waldegrave, with all the blandness of the most motherly air, "are worthy of being loved by the highest, the proudest, and the noblest."

"Then will you dare assert that Valentine has proved himself unworthy of my love?" asked Florence, starting from her seat. "No, no, you would not tell me that. I should not believe you, nothing on earth could make me believe you."

Mrs. Waldegrave now saw that in order to crush, as it were, the spirit of her intended victim, it was necessary to wound that spirit in its most tender point; and therefore, gazing with solemn earnestness and mournful gravity at the young damsel's countenance, she said, "Florence, prepare yourself to hear something of a most unpleasant character. Valentine Malvern is no longer worthy of you."

"It is false, it is false!" shrieked forth Florence, in a wild and piercing tone. Then, clasping her hands together in a paroxysm of acute mental agony, she exclaimed, "I may

be mad in some respects, mad with presentiments, mad when haunted by images of evil, mad when gazing upon certain incidents of the past, but never, never will my mind become so clouded as to suffer the belief to creep into it that Valentine is false. Madam, I begin to suspect you of some deep and sinister motives, or perhaps you may only say this to try me, to put my fortitude and my reason to the test? But, oh, if such be your object, it is cruelly carried out, most cruelly, most barbarously."

"Florence, my dear girl," said Mrs. Waldegrave, rising from her seat and taking both the young lady's hands in her own, "we will say no more concerning this subject upon the present occasion. I do not wish to torture you unnecessarily, nor put you to a test that is too severe. Will you allow me to introduce to you to-morrow a person of my acquaintance who will himself explain, much better than I can possibly do, all that is necessary for you to know?"

It instantaneously struck Florence that Mrs. Waldegrave was alluding to some physician, in plain terms, a mad-doctor, and though this impression was accompanied by a cold tremor passing rapidly over her entire frame, yet it almost immediately yielded to a feeling of relief and satisfaction as the second thought flashed to her mind that it was merely a test as to her sanity which she had to undergo. The interval of hesitation before she answered was therefore so short that it scarcely seemed any hesitation at all, and she said, in a tone the calmness of which somewhat surprised Mrs. Waldegrave, "Yes, I will see the person to whom you allude; and rest assured that I will not only hear him patiently, but will answer him without passion and without excitement."

"Ah! if you will only listen to him as patiently as you propose," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "you will be adopting the course most likely to conduce to your own interests."

"Be assured, madam, that I will do so," rejoined Florence. "And now, with your permission, I will retire to my chamber, for I wish to reflect upon all you have been saying."

"Do so, my dear child," was the answer, "and I will write and tell the person to whom I have alluded that he may be here to-morrow about midday."

Florence Eaton then quitted the apartment where this

dialogue had taken place, and retiring to her own chamber, she sat down to ponder upon everything she had heard.

"No," she said to herself, after a long and serious meditation, "it is impossible, utterly impossible, that Valentine can be false, equally impossible that by any act on his part he could become unworthy of my love. But, oh, could Mrs. Waldegrave's words have had another meaning, a meaning which, nevertheless, is to lead to the same end? Is it her opinion that the morbid condition of my mind renders me unfit to become the bride of Valentine Malvern, and that such an alliance, so far from sealing our happiness, would stamp the misery of us both? Alas! I fear that such was indeed the meaning of her words, a meaning which she, however, veiled as delicately and as skilfully as she could, but in such a manner that it might dawn in unto my comprehension when duly pondered upon. Yes, she told me, at the outset, that the course which young ladies mark out for themselves to pursue is not the one which destiny intends them to adopt, and she spoke to me of the necessity of renouncing all those ideas of happiness which I may have formed in the belief that I was to become Valentine's wife. In telling me that Valentine was false, it was perhaps but a well-meant artifice to prepare me for that other revelation, namely, that though he himself is true, yet that it is I who, in consequence of increasing mental infirmity, must no longer dream of the accomplishment of this alliance.

"And that person who is coming to-morrow, and of whom she spoke so guardedly and even with such mystery, who can it be, if not a physician, a mad-doctor, to tell me all that it is necessary I should know? Yes, yes, I understand everything now. Poor Mrs. Waldegrave had not the heart to make known to me the extent of my misfortune. She has left it for one who, being of the other sex, possesses a stronger nerve, and who from his avocations is more experienced in the fulfilment of these cruel offices. Alas, alas! are all my hopes of happiness wrecked in this world? But ah! what meant Mrs. Waldegrave by alluding to another career already marked out, another basis whereon my happiness is to be established? What meant she also by speaking of splendours and brilliancies in connection therewith? Oh, is it possible that my father, the prince regent, intends to take me away from those with whom my life has hitherto

been passed, and compel me to mingle in the sunshine gaieties of a court life? Yes, yes, this must have been her meaning; what other could she have had? But Heaven send that my father may rather banish me for ever from his mind, forget that there is such a being as myself in existence, than assert a parental control over me, and compel me to enter upon a new phase of existence which for me must be wretched in proportion to its brilliancy."

We have given this train of thoughts in the shape best calculated to render it intelligible to our readers, but it was not in the same unbroken continuity nor collected style that the unhappy girl pursued her meditations. Each new idea that entered her brain was fraught with a fresh agony; each successive conjecture that presented itself to her soul was marked by a renewed paroxysm of excitement. Tears and wringing of hands, convulsive sobs and deep sighs, intervals of blank despair and others of impassioned grief, — by all these evidences of a shattering mind and a breaking heart were the poor girl's thoughts characterized.

At length, after having remained for several hours alone in her chamber, she exclaimed aloud, " Suspense upon one point is intolerable. I will know the worst at once."

Then the beautiful creature, so lovely and so sweetly interesting even in the hour of her bitterest grief and profoundest despondency, summoned all her fortitude to her aid, marshalled all her energies, and with a mingled courage, dignity, and resignation retraced her way to the apartment where she had left Mrs. Waldegrave. Advancing with slow but firm step straight up to that lady, she said, " Madam, I have been reflecting upon all that took place between us ere now, and there is one point upon which I must demand — or beseech, if you will — an immediate explanation. You spoke of another career that was to open before me, and which is to be associated with circumstances of splendour and brilliancy. A suspicion as to your real meaning has entered my mind."

" Ah! you suspect something, my dear child? " exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with a degree of suspense up into the young damsel's countenance.

" Yes, I suspect," responded Florence, speaking slowly and deliberately, " that your words alluded to some design

which a very high personage may have formed concerning me."

"It is possible that you have fathomed my meaning, then?" cried Mrs. Waldegrave, in the most unfeigned astonishment. "I must have been more explicit, therefore, than it struck me I was."

"Explicit enough, madam," answered Florence, "to enable me to comprehend your meaning," and the young girl's countenance was pale as marble as she spoke, and her features were rigid, while in her voice there was a depth of tone which made her seem as if she were a statue speaking.

"How singular you look, my dear child!" said Mrs. Waldegrave, not knowing what to think of Miss Eaton's demeanour and conduct. "Are you sure that you have actually understood my meaning?"

"When I mention the name of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent," returned Florence, "is it not sufficient to convince you that I labour under no error as to the significancy of your words?"

"You are right, Florence, you are right!" exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave. "Tell me at once, then, what think you? What say you?"

"Madam," answered the young lady, in a cold and seemingly passionless voice, "when that person to whom you have alluded comes to-morrow, I will tell him everything that now occupies my mind, I will explain myself thoroughly to him. And now, with your permission, I will keep my chamber until the hour to-morrow when the contemplated interview is to take place, for I have much need of self-communing."

"Be it as you will, my dear Florence," answered Mrs. Waldegrave, "although I would rather have you with me. But if you prefer being alone, I shall not attempt to thwart you. All your repasts shall be duly taken up to your chamber, and you have but to ring the bell in order to summon the servant for whatsoever you require."

Florence withdrew, and retraced her steps to her own apartment, but scarcely had she closed the door behind her when all the fortitude which had sustained her during this last brief colloquy with Mrs. Waldegrave suddenly giving way, she burst into tears, and, wringing her hands in despair, exclaimed, "It is then as I thought. Yes, not only am I

to be for ever separated from him who is dearer to me than life, but to be claimed by a parent whom — O God! that I should be compelled even to harbour the thought — I shrink from acknowledging as such."

And then poor Florence Eaton gave way to all the anguish produced by these reflections which were so full of a harrowing poignancy. The hours passed, the several meals were served up, but were removed again, untasted; and when night came, the unhappy girl, worn out with wretchedness and grief, gladly sought her couch, where, through sheer exhaustion, she speedily sank into the temporary oblivion of a sound slumber.

CHAPTER XLII

VARIOUS PROCEEDINGS IN DIFFERENT QUARTERS

It would be impossible to describe the grief and perplexity which prevailed at Hallingham Hall on account of the disappearance of Florence. The servants whom Lord Florimel had sent about in every direction to make inquiries were active in so doing throughout the rest of the night. They called at the cottages of all the farm-labourers around about, summoning them from their beds to answer the questions put to them; they also inquired at the taverns in the adjacent villages, to ascertain the circumstance under which any vehicle might have happened to stop there at about that time of the night when Florence was carried off; but all these inquiries were fruitless. Throughout the two following days Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine themselves rode about in all directions, renewing those inquiries, and still all was in vain. They were overwhelmed with affliction at the inutility of their search, and as for Pauline, she was well-nigh distracted.

The circumstance was involved in a mystery which appeared impenetrable, for it was impossible to fix even the slightest shadow of a suspicion upon any one as the author of the outrage. That Florence had been carried off by some individual who was enamoured of her charms was the only, and, indeed, the most natural way of accounting for the incident, but at this point conjecture suddenly stopped. A wall of adamant barred its progress, for, as above stated, there was no particular individual to whom suspicion pointed as the perpetrator of the wrong. It has been said in one of the early chapters of this narrative that the Florimels mingled but little in society, and received only a select number of guests at any time;

and amongst this circle of their friends there was no man who had ever been noticed to cast an improper look upon their cherished niece. Thus the young lady's mysterious disappearance was enveloped in the darkest mystery, and was too well calculated to engender the most serious apprehensions.

For the two days following the abduction Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern, as already said, were unwearied in their inquiries. On the third day, after a serious consultation together, they visited a very active justice of the peace residing in the neighbourhood, to whom they communicated everything that had occurred. This gentleman confessed himself entirely at fault as to the course that should be adopted, after the vain and ineffectual inquiries which had been already made, but he ultimately suggested that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the celebrated Bow Street officer, should be at once fetched from London and employed in the investigation. Valentine, who, as the reader will recollect, was well acquainted with the astute thief-taker, caught at the plan, and declared his intention of at once hurrying up to London and bringing Sampson down into Buckinghamshire. He and Lord Florimel returned to Hallingham Hall to order a carriage to be got in readiness, and while it was being prepared, Sir Valentine asked the nobleman whether it were advisable for him, when in London, to call at Carlton House, and inform his Royal Highness of the mysterious disappearance of Florence. But Lord Florimel urged Valentine not to delay an instant in bringing Lawrence Sampson back with him to Hallingham, observing, in addition, that it could serve no useful end to acquaint the prince with the occurrence, as his Royal Highness could do no more than they themselves were already performing, and the case was too urgent to admit of even the hour's delay that would be caused by a visit to Carlton House. Valentine coincided with Lord Florimel's view, and entering the carriage, sped away to London. It was late in the afternoon when he reached the metropolis, and proceeding at once to Long Acre, he was fortunate in finding Larry Sampson at home. The officer was just sitting down to a late dinner, after the day's business, but on hearing Sir Valentine's tale, he at once threw down his knife and fork, pushed aside the plate with its untasted contents, and lost not a moment

in accompanying the young baronet. In the middle of the night they reached Hallingham Hall.

After a few hours' rest, Larry Sampson was on the alert. He made Sir Valentine Malvern give him, as minutely as was possible, a description of the man in the labourer's dress who had decoyed him, with the false alarm of Lord Florimel's alleged danger, into the grove. He then asked for the cords with which the baronet had been bound to the tree, and these were given to him. He likewise obtained an exact description of Florence Eaton, even to the dress which she had on at the time of her disappearance, and which her lover and aunt, as well as her principal tiring-maid, well remembered. Possessed of these particulars, and taking the cords with him, Mr. Sampson set out alone upon his researches, declining to be accompanied by any one, as he declared that he could always manage these matters best by himself.

The scene now changes to Carlton House in London. It was the evening of that same day on which the dialogues described in the previous chapter took place between Florence Eaton and Mrs. Waldegrave, and at about ten o'clock Mrs. Gale was introduced by the faithful valet Germain into the presence of the prince regent.

"Ah! my active agent in pleasant mischief," exclaimed the prince, the moment the valet had retired and he was alone with the infamous woman in the apartment where he thus received her, "so you have come to give me good tidings at last? I received your letter two or three days ago, dated from Lechmere Grange in Oxfordshire, stating that the commission was so far fulfilled that the fair one who is to replace my lost Venetia was already caught in the toils which yourself and her ladyship had so cunningly spread to ensnare her. But how does the sweet bird take her captivity? Does she flutter in the cage, and will she fly away from me when I appear in her presence?"

"Prince," answered Mrs. Gale, "I think that when you see this sweet bird, as you call her, you will pronounce her to be a very miracle of beauty. The letter that I had the honour to address to your Royal Highness was necessarily brief, on account of being so cautiously worded, as I was fearful lest it should fall into other hands. I had, therefore, no

opportunity of expatiating upon the countless charms and attractions of this sweet creature. She is not only transcendingly beautiful, but chaste and pure beyond the possibility of doubt. She belongs to an excellent family, and yet is totally uncontaminated with the fevered atmosphere of fashionable life, having been brought up in comparative seclusion, and amidst a small and very select circle of friends."

"On my soul, Mrs. Gale, you are quite poetical in your description," observed the prince. "Is she as handsome as Venetia?"

"She is not so brilliantly handsome nor so voluptuously splendid as Lady Sackville," replied Mrs. Gale, "but she is endowed with a beauty far more ethereal, more refined, and more exquisite than that of her ladyship. She is a being whom I am convinced, sir, you will love passionately, ay, and love for ever, — which," added the infamous woman, with a smile, "is saying a great deal for your Royal Highness."

"I am almost afraid you are saying too much, Mrs. Gale," cried the prince, laughing. "You have indeed piqued my curiosity to an extraordinary degree, and I do already feel over head and ears in love with this sweet creature, before I have seen her. But ah!" ejaculated the prince, as a sudden idea struck him, and a cloud all in a moment fell upon his countenance, "what possible guarantee have I that all this is not a trick? I mean to say, how can I be assured that you and this Lady Lechmere who is leagued with you in the matter have not tutored some artful girl to play the coy and prudish maiden, when perhaps she is no more entitled to the name of maiden at all than the bar-girl in a canteen frequented by a whole regiment of horse-guards?"

"So confident am I that when your Royal Highness sees this divine creature you will at once fling aside the unworthy suspicion you have just hinted at, that I shall not ask for another guinea in the shape of recompense until after your Royal Highness's victory is achieved."

"Well, this is speaking fair enough at all events," exclaimed the prince. "But now tell me who the young lady is, for, if you recollect, you mentioned no name in your letter."

"Of course not, sir. I wrote guardedly, as in duty bound,"

responded Mrs. Gale. "Neither will I mention any name upon the present occasion, after the suspicion which you entertained."

"But I entertain it no longer," interrupted the prince. "Perhaps I was even wrong to mention it; but then, of course, I do not wish to have a world of trouble for nothing, and find myself made a fool of, after all. Who is she, I repeat?"

"Now, pray bridle your curiosity, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Gale, "and ask not a single question until you have seen the young lady. In fact, Lady Lechmere and I have resolved that you shall see her first before you know anything more, so convinced are we that at a glance your great experience in physiognomy will enable you to recognize the truth of all I am telling you concerning her innocence and purity. As for the beauty of the young lady, on that score there cannot be two opininons."

"Well, have your own way, then," said the prince, who never argued a point long. "But tell me, does she know me?"

"I cannot exactly say whether she knows your Royal Highness by sight, or not. It is most probable that she does, inasmuch as she habitually lives in London with her relatives. But this I do know, that she has never been to court nor attended the royal drawing-rooms. And now I am reminded," added Mrs. Gale, "that I have something more to state. Your Royal Highness will recollect that you gave me instructions not to let your name be mentioned in the presence of the young lady, whomsoever she were, that I might select to minister to your pleasure, but I am bound to inform you that Lady Lechmere, in a conversation which she had with our fair captive this morning, spoke the least thing too plainly while preparing her mind for your visit, and it would appear that, after two or three hours' solitary deliberation, the young creature's suspicions fell into the right path and led her on to the solution of the enigma."

"Ah! then she knows she is destined for me?" ejaculated the prince, but without any feeling of annoyance.

"She knows this much," answered Mrs. Gale, "that your Royal Highness is to pay your respects to her to-morrow in the middle of the day."

"The deuce!" cried the prince, "the notice is but short. It is true, however, the distance is but short also, — some forty-five miles, I believe, or thereabouts. Is it not so?"

"It is, sir, and the road is good. I left Lechmere Grange at five this evening, was in London at a little past nine, called at the palace and learned that your Royal Highness was entertaining company and could not see me till ten, at which hour I came back —"

"Well, well," cried the prince, somewhat impatiently, "spare those details, and tell me what said our young lady on learning that she would see me to-morrow. Was she pleased?"

"No; or else how could I expect you to believe in her purity and virtue? I was not present at the time, but Lady Lechmere tells me that she seemed almost stupefied, as it were, as if she felt that it was her destiny to become your mistress, and yet was filled with consternation at the idea. She said that when she saw you to-morrow she would explain all the thoughts that occupied her mind, and would deal most candidly with you."

"And what does Lady Lechmere argue from this?" inquired the prince.

"That you will have a very touching and pathetic scene," rejoined Mrs. Gale. "That the fair one, in short, will throw herself upon your mercy, appeal to your best feelings, and all that kind of thing. But that she will surrender without a desperate defence is not to be for a moment expected."

"Ah! then it will be truly piquant and exciting," exclaimed the prince. "I really long to see her. But are you sure that the adventure is a safe one, and that there are no cursed risks to run?"

"There are always risks in these matters," replied Mrs. Gale, "but I do not for an instant dread anything like noise or exposure. The young lady's relations will be, I dare say, very glad to effect a compromise agreeable to all parties. The circumstance need not prevent her marrying, and then she and her husband can live in the palace, just as Lord and Lady Sackville used to do."

"I see you have got it all nicely cut and dried for me, Mrs. Gale," said the prince, rising from his seat. "I do not think that we can now have anything more to talk about. I will run down in a plain travelling-carriage to-morrow in the

forenoon, and will be at Lechmere Grange as soon after midday as possible."

Mrs. Gale then took her departure, and proceeded to her house in Soho Square, where she spent the night; but she was up soon after daybreak in order to speed back to Lechmere Grange and give due notice of the prince's intended coming.

Meanwhile Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been pursuing his inquiries not only in Buckinghamshire, but had also pushed them into the adjoining counties of Bedford and Oxford. In the first place, he had questioned the keepers at all the turnpikes upon the public roads in that part of the country, and this was a proceeding which it had never struck Florimel nor Sir Valentine Malvern to adopt. The result was that Mr. Sampson learned that on the particular evening referred to as that of the abduction, and at about ten o'clock, the keeper of a turnpike remembered a carriage and four horses driving up at a tremendous pace, and by the light streaming from his own window he caught a glimpse of the beautiful face of a young lady looking through the glass of the carriage. The man was struck by the expression of the countenance at the time, because he fancied it looked anxious and frightened; and he noticed that it was shaded by a profusion of light hair, falling in long curls from under a sort of gipsy bonnet such as young ladies were accustomed to wear in those times when in the country. Beyond this information the turnpike-keeper could give no details of importance. He did not recollect the colour of the carriage, but he remembered that it had four horses, with two postilions, and a servant seated on the box.

Mr. Sampson was convinced in his own mind that he had thus obtained a clue to the object of his search, and that the countenance which the turnpike-man had noticed was that of Florence Eaton. He accordingly followed up his inquiries along that same road, and managed to trace the carriage and four into Oxfordshire, but there he lost scent of it altogether, and therefore came to the conclusion that it had turned out of the main route into some branch road or by-lane. But he now prosecuted his researches all about the district into which he had succeeded in tracing the equipage, and visiting each town and village, he endeavoured

to find out whether any cord answering a particular description had been recently purchased in that neighbourhood. At length this portion of his inquiry was crowned with success, and he discovered the shop at which the very cord which had bound Malvern's limbs, and which he had brought with him, was procured. The purchaser of that cord was recollected, as to his personal appearance, by the shopkeeper, to whom, however, the man's name and all other particulars concerning him were utterly unknown; but from the description given, Sampson had no doubt the individual was the same person in the labourer's dress who had decoyed Sir Valentine into the grove. At another village, two or three miles distant, Mr. Sampson ascertained that some black crape had been purchased at about the same time as the cord, and by an individual exactly answering the above description; so that the material of which the masks were made that were worn by the three accomplices had been likewise bought in the same district as the cord, and by the same man, was a fact fully established. Mr. Sampson's researches were therefore now directed toward the discovery of this man, and at length he succeeded in hearing of such a person. Once upon the track, his inquiries were quickly followed up until he obtained positive information that the individual in question was none other than a domestic in the service of a lady of quality whose country-seat was not many miles distant from the villages where the previous links in the chain of evidence had been detected.

The prosecution of this search and the following up of the various traces which led him on step by step to the final discovery where Florence Eaton was, had occupied several days, and it was between ten and eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the eighth day after the abduction that Mr. Sampson returned to Hallingham Hall. The results of his proceedings were instantly made known to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern, and a carriage and four was at once got in readiness to bear them all three to the mansion where Florence Eaton was held captive. The distance from Hallingham to that mansion was about sixteen miles, and consequently, with four fleet horses, it could be accomplished in about an hour and a half. Fortunately Lord Florimel was in the commission of the peace for Oxfordshire as well as Buckinghamshire, and therefore he was enabled to arm him-

self and companions with an authority to take decisive measures should any opposition or resistance be experienced at the place whither they were now proceeding for the recovery of Florence.

CHAPTER XLIII

LECHMERE GRANGE

At the very time that the carriage and four, containing Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, was flying along the highroad into Oxfordshire, Florence Eaton was seated in her own chamber at the mansion of her captivity, preparing her mind for the supposed interview with the mad-doctor; for that such was the character of the individual whom she was to meet soon after midday she still implicitly believed. Since her second interview with Mrs. Waldegrave, on the previous day, she had kept her chamber, the lady's-maid who was in special attendance upon her serving her meals. But these, as intimated at the conclusion of a previous chapter, went away untasted, and even on the morning of the day of which we are now writing Florence had taken nothing but some tea. Thus for four and twenty hours nought in the shape of substantial food had passed the poor girl's lips.

It was now verging toward noon, and she was seated in her chamber, endeavouring to arrange in her mind all that she should say to the physician whom she supposed about to visit her. She had resolved to tell him everything, the whole history of her parentage, the morbid feelings which the knowledge of that secret had engendered in her mind, and the sensation of loathing and horror with which she had been gradually led on by those feelings to contemplate the image of her royal father. It was the purpose of the poor girl to make a friend of the physician, for that he would be accessible to such sympathy she did not doubt, and she even went so far as to picture to herself a kind-hearted, and fatherly old gentleman who would listen to her with interest and attention and do what he could to serve her.

"I will ask him," thought Florence to herself, "to go at once to my uncle and aunt, to tell them that the prince purposes to take me away altogether from their guardianship and compel me to plunge into the dizzy whirl of a court life. I will beseech him to urge those dear relatives to take me home to them again at once, and to save me from my own father. I will tell the worthy physician that if it be really hoped to restore my mind to the equanimity it once enjoyed, this aim can only be accomplished by allowing me to relapse into the calm and tranquil tenor of existence which I until lately led; but that it would unsettle my mind for ever were I to be surrendered up to the guardianship of that parent whom, alas! I cannot love, and whose image fills me with a horror and a loathing stronger than all my powers of resistance."

In this manner did the musings of Florence Eaton continue, so that, as the reader will perceive, she looked forward with hope and cheerfulness to the interview which she fancied she was to have with a physician. There was no presentiment of evil at this hour in the young maiden's mind. She indeed felt happier than she had yet done since the night of her abduction, for she confidently anticipated that either this same day or the next would restore her to her uncle and aunt at Hallingham Hall. And did she not likewise think of Valentine? Oh, yes, and she also hoped that she would yet become his bride.

It was a little past noon when she heard the sounds of wheels approaching up the avenue which intersected the park, and looking forth from her chamber window, which was in the front of the house, she observed a plain travelling-carriage driving up to the principal entrance of the mansion.

"Here is the physician," she said to herself; but her window was so situated that she could not catch a glimpse of the individual who alighted from the carriage.

Ten minutes now elapsed, during which interval Florence Eaton felt an increasing excitement, and, for the first time this day, vague fears and apprehensions relative to the supposed physician's visit began to rise up in her mind. What if he should prove otherwise in character and disposition than she had imagined? What if he were stern, austere, and morose, instead of benevolent and kind? What if he were to refuse to allow her to return to her relatives,

or to interest himself any way in her behalf? What, in short, if he had even come to bear her away to London and hand her over to the charge of the prince? Oh, now indeed were these misgivings crowding in rapidly, and still more rapidly, upon the young maiden's mind, and now also did a presentiment of evil, dark and ominous, overshadow her soul with a deepening gloom, as the storm-clouds gather suddenly upon a sky previously tranquil and serene.

" It appears as if some crisis in my destiny were at hand," thought Florence to herself, and as she caught a glimpse of her countenance in the mirror, when wandering about the room with increasing excitement, she recoiled from the ghastly aspect of her own features. Then, sinking upon a chair, she pressed her hand upon her bosom to still the strong pulsations of her heart; and as the apprehensions of coming evil gained more and more upon her, she felt that it was only by a strong effort she could prevent herself from bursting forth into a fit of wild, hysterical screaming.

Presently she heard a footstep approaching the door. Rising to her feet, she gave utterance to the word " Now! " in an abrupt, decisive tone, and all in a moment she found herself cool and collected. The tempest within her had lulled in an instant, but it was a calm unnatural to a degree. She had not, however, time for further analysis of her thoughts, as the door opened and Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance.

" How are you to-day, my dear child? " she said, with the most amiable look and in the kindest tone.

" I know not how I feel," answered Florence. " But that carriage which is just arrived — "

" It is he whom you are to meet," was the answer given by Mrs. Waldegrave, who anticipated the meaning of the question.

" Then let me go to him at once," Florence immediately replied, " for the sooner the interview takes place, the better."

" Yes, you shall go at once, my dear girl," answered Mrs. Waldegrave. Then suddenly catching Florence by the arm, she said, " But you intend to be calm, collected, and reasonable? "

" As I am at this moment," rejoined Florence, and she moved toward the door.

"You do not wish me to accompany you?" asked Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with some degree of anxiety upon the young lady, whose look and manner she was still at a loss altogether to comprehend.

"No, no," replied Florence, with a sort of feverish petulance. "I must see him alone. Let me go to him by myself. Where is he?"

"In the same room where we conversed together yesterday."

"Then I will proceed thither," and Florence sped away toward the apartment thus indicated.

A few moments brought her there. She would not allow herself to pause, even for an instant, lest the courage which at present sustained her should all in a moment give way, but she hastened on, with that kind of desperate feeling which impels the individual in cases of suspense to seek to know the best or worst at once.

She entered the room. A person was standing at one of the windows, looking out, and consequently with his back toward her. The door still remained open in her hand as he turned around, and then, oh, amazement and horror! instead of the stranger-countenance of a physician, the well-known face of the prince regent was at once revealed to her.

"Florence! Good God, Florence!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, in a voice of mingled wonder and consternation.

But a wild affright seized upon the maiden, and she bounded away from the apartment. The prince hurried after her, crying, "Florence! Florence!"

"No, no!" she shrieked forth, and onward she flew, as if wings were fastened to her feet.

"Florence, my dear girl, Florence dearest, I beseech you to stop," exclaimed the prince, pursuing her as quickly as he could.

She had reached the landing, and glanced back at the foot of the next ascent of stairs to see if he were following her, but the instant she caught a glimpse of his approaching form, she ran wildly up the staircase, still shrieking forth, "No, no!"

"She is mad, poor girl! She is mad!" cried the prince, and terror lending wings also to his feet, despite the corpulency of his person, he still hastened after her.

Florence had now gained that long passage whence the

chambers of the domestics opened on either side, and there she paused to gather breath, clinging pale and trembling to the banisters, with mingled anguish and terror distorting every lineament of the countenance that was naturally so sweet, so lovely. But, hark! footsteps are pursuing, hastily do they ascend the stairs, and in another instant she again beholds her father close behind.

"No, no," she repeats, in still more wild and thrilling notes, "you shall not take me away with you! The image of my mother beckons me to beware."

Thus speaking, she flew along the passage, and reached the steps leading up into the loft above.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the prince. "She is mad! She will do herself a mischief!" and onward he sped in the pursuit.

He also reached the steps in an incredibly short space of time, considering the unwieldiness of his person, but pausing at the bottom to recover breath, he called out, "Florence, Florence, wherefore do you fly away from me? Fear nothing. I will bear you hence. You shall not stay here another moment, you shall go away with me."

"No, no!" were the thrilling tones of a still wilder anguish, which rang through the loft above, and falling upon the prince's ear, seemed to penetrate to his very brain.

Up the steps he sped, he entered the loft, and beheld Florence fling a wild, affrighted look over her shoulder, as she was precipitating herself onward to the farther extremity of the place.

"Florence, I conjure you!"

"No, no!" was the wildly repeated cry, and as she uttered it, she drew back a bolt which held fast a door at that end of the loft.

"Florence!" exclaimed the prince, bounding forward to catch her.

But at that instant the door which she had reached was flung open, and the blaze of sunlight burst into the loft. Nothing save the sunny atmosphere seemed to be beyond that threshold, and as the hapless maiden disappeared from the prince's view, the terrific shriek that thrilled from her lips pierced like an ice-shaft through his brain.

"O God!" he cried, in appalling agony, and fell forward senseless upon the floor of the loft.

During the few minutes occupied in the scene which we have just been relating a travelling-carriage and four had entered the park and was dashing up the avenue to the front of the mansion. The windows of the vehicle were down, and a countenance thrust forth was anxiously surveying the exterior of the building which the equipage was thus approaching. This was Sir Valentine Malvern, who, with all a lover's natural excitement, was looking forth in the hope of catching the first glimpse of his well-beloved's face at one of the numerous windows of the immense structure.

"It is a fine old place, this Lechmere Grange," said Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with characteristic coolness, for nothing ever ruffled the equanimity of the Bow Street officer.

"Yes, a fine old place," answered Lord Florimel, to whom the remark was addressed. "But who would have thought," he immediately added, in mingled excitement and indignation, "that a person of Lady Lechmere's rank and position in society could have been base enough to lend herself to this outrage which is still so unaccountable? For I cannot possibly conceive what motive —"

At this instant a terrific cry burst forth from the lips of Sir Valentine Malvern, and, almost simultaneously, another but still more piercing and more agonizing shriek thrilled through the air.

"Just God! 'tis Florence!" exclaimed Lord Florimel, as he beheld from the window of the carriage the same appalling spectacle which had elicited that burst of mingled horror and despair from Sir Valentine Malvern.

The carriage stopped suddenly, for the postilions, who had likewise beheld the tremendous tragedy, reined in their steeds at the angle of the building nearest to the spot where the occurrence had just taken place.

Alas! the reader cannot fail to have comprehended the nature of this shocking tragedy. The door through which Florence had disappeared from the view of the prince in the loft opened, not into some adjacent room, as the poor girl in the bewilderment of her feelings had doubtless fancied, but into the very air itself. It was the one to which the old disused crane belonged, the one, in short, that opened from the end of the building right upon the abyss below. Down she had fallen, down, down, that sweet angelic

girl, down from the tremendous height, upon a parterre of flowers that lay immediately beneath.

When Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, leaping from the carriage, rushed to the spot, they raised the inanimate form in their arms, and though it was not mangled nor crushed nor even disfigured, yet life was extinct. The lovely and the innocent was no more; she had fallen through the sunny air, warm and glowing as her own generous heart in life had been, and her death-bed was formed of flowers as sweet and beautiful as herself.

CHAPTER XLIV

CONCLUSION

We now take up our pen for the purpose of bringing the present narrative to a close, and recording the necessary farewell words in respect to some of the characters that have figured in our drama, as well as duly chronicling the fate that overtook others. Were we to give in minute details that rapid summary of particulars which we are about to sketch in mere outline, we should be enabled yet to extend our history to many additional chapters; but the doleful tragedy which we have just related — a tragedy so replete with horror and woe — has indisposed us for the promulgation of our tale. Besides, the heart sickens at the thought of the guilty career of that prince whose misdeeds have furnished the groundwork for our past narrative, and we long to escape from the unnatural atmosphere which envelops his memory.

About the same time that the eventful drama was taking place in Lechmere Grange, Bencull, the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker were put upon their trial at the Old Bailey for the murder of Nell Gibson. The Buttoner, who had turned king's evidence, was the principal witness against them. When placed together in the dock, the four prisoners, who had not seen each other since their committal to Newgate, — they having been there kept in separate cells for security's sake, — exchanged grim smiles of recognition. Their hardihood had not forsaken them; desperate as their lives had been, so did they still continue in their conduct during the ordeal that was to lead to death. As for the Hangman, he preserved a degree of brutal indifference and hardened ruffianism which stamped him as a monster in human shape. When the Buttoner made his appearance in the witness-box, Daniel Coffin

rattled his chains furiously, shook his clenched fists at the approver, and vomited forth such a torrent of dreadful imprecations and hideous curses against the man that the whole of the crowded court was shocked and appalled. The judge was compelled to inform the ferocious prisoner that unless he held his tongue he must be removed forcibly, and the trial would proceed without him. Daniel Coffin accordingly desisted, but throughout the Buttoner's evidence he maintained a succession of savage growls rather resembling those of a wild beast than of a human being. The charge was fully proved against himself and his comrades, and sentence of death was passed upon them in due form. It was therefore unnecessary to prosecute the Hangman further, and thus no cognizance was taken by the tribunal of the double murder which the dreadful monster had perpetrated at the fence's house in Whitechapel.

We must observe, however, that when the judge had announced their doom to the four prisoners, the Hangman gave vent to another volley of horrible imprecations, not merely levelled against the Buttoner, but likewise against the judge, the prosecuting counsel, and all who had been in any way mixed up with the judicial proceedings. The frightful strain was taken up by his three comrades, and while thus pouring forth their rage, they were carried back to the gaol. There they were placed in the condemned cells, each in a separate one, and positive orders were given that Daniel Coffin was to be allowed no opportunity of communication with any one outside the prison walls. It subsequently transpired that this command was issued in consequence of instructions sent direct from the Home Office. Doubtless the prince regent thought that the more closely Daniel Coffin's lips were kept sealed, the better. The fellow did, however, give the turnkeys the particulars of all that had ever taken place between himself and the prince, — especially the trick played in respect to Dysart, and the affair of Westminster Bridge; but either the turnkeys did not believe him, or, if they did, were too discreet to mention the circumstances elsewhere.

We must add that Coffin wrote a letter to the prince, begging his Royal Highness to commute the sentence which had been passed into one of transportation for life, but the epistle, wherein threats and entreaties were strangely

jumbled, remained unanswered. Perhaps, indeed, it was never sent at all by the turnkey to whom it was entrusted for the purpose. In short, Daniel Coffin and his three accomplices in crime suffered death on the scaffold in the Old Bailey, their ruffian-hardihood enduring to the very last; and thus the man who had so often officiated as the public executioner on strangulation-days was himself sent out of existence on the same stage where he had aided in launching so many miserable wretches into eternity.

The funeral of poor Florence Eaton was conducted in a private and unostentatious manner; her remains were deposited in the village church near Hallingham Hall, Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern being the chief mourners. The prince regent had signified his desire to attend the obsequies, but Lord Florimel, in reply, gave his Royal Highness to understand that if he appeared upon the scene it would be considered little better than an outrage, not only to the feelings of those true mourners who would be present on the occasion, but likewise to the memory of her whose ashes were to be consigned to the dust. When the funeral was over, Lord and Lady Florimel went abroad and remained upon the Continent for many years. They vowed at their departure that they would never return to England again so long as that prince who had caused their beloved niece's death exercised the sovereign sway.

Thus, during the remainder of his regency, and throughout the period of his reign as king of England, Lord and Lady Florimel continued to abide in foreign climes; and it was only when William IV ascended the throne that they returned to England, after an absence of fifteen years. The violence of their grief for the loss of the beloved Florence had long been mellowed down into a mournful remembrance of the departed girl; but they never again mingled in the gaieties of life, but devoted the rest of their days to deeds of benevolence and charity. Seldom is it that persons bearing an aristocratic title succeed in winning the love of the poorer orders, but the names of Lord and Lady Florimel were never mentioned by the suffering and oppressed save in terms of gratitude and respect. They bestowed not their gold upon the canting hypocrites of Exeter Hall, they afforded no subsidies to the associations whose objects are to convert the heathen thousands of miles away, but all

their sympathies and their aids were exercised amongst the poor, the destitute, and the indigent whose name is legion in the British Isles.

Sir Valentine Malvern, immediately after the funeral of the perished Florence, had besought the Florimels to permit him to take up his abode at Hallingham Hall, for he declared that the only way in which he could be induced to resign himself to the fate that had thus so cruelly separated him from everything he had loved or could ever love again upon earth was by dwelling near the spot where the remains of the departed girl were laid, so that he might visit that tomb of hallowed memories, that sepulchre of his own heart's withered hopes and blighted affections. Ere leaving England, therefore, Lord and Lady Florimel gave Sir Valentine the mournful permission which he sought, and he took up his abode at Hallingham. On every Sabbath morning, when the village rustics and maidens were repairing to the church, they beheld Sir Valentine Malvern bending his way on foot slowly thither, and on entering the sacred edifice, as he passed to his pew, would he pause near the simple but elegant monument which marked the resting-place of Florence Eaton, and the tears would trickle down his cheeks. Then, the service being over, he would remain behind the rest of the congregation, and when the church was cleared he would seek the sacred spot again, and kneeling on the cold marble, would pray a long time in silence, while fresh tears trickled down his manly cheeks. The old sextoness, who knew the sad history, never offered to lock the church door, nor even ventured to show any sign of impatience at being thus kept waiting while Sir Valentine, mourning over his lost one, prayed for strength to support his bereavement. Sometimes in the week-days he would call upon the sextoness, borrow the church keys, and pass hours alone together within the walls of that humble village temple. Many and many a golden guinea was slipped by Sir Valentine into the hands of the old sextoness, so that his bounty became a handsome annuity to the worthy woman.

Years passed, and still Sir Valentine Malvern continued to dwell at Hallingham Hall. His grief became attempered to a manly resignation, and if he were never, on the one hand, exhilarated into joy, on the other hand, his feelings were never warped by misanthropy. Sometimes he received

a few select friends at the hall, and was frequently visited by his half-sisters and their husbands, and on those occasions, while performing all the duties of hospitality in a becoming manner, his deportment, though far from cheerful, was nevertheless by no means calculated to diffuse an unpleasant gloom around him. But he never loved again. The earth possessed not an angel in female shape who had the power to roll the stone from his sepulchral heart; that heart was the tomb in which the image of the cherished Florence was preserved, embalmed with the holy fragrance of an imperishable fidelity. After Lord and Lady Florimel returned to England, Sir Valentine Malvern still continued to occupy Hallingham Hall. At their death, which happened in 1847, both dying within the same year, that mansion, together with the Buckinghamshire estate, was bequeathed to him, and there he still resides at the present day, the object of love and veneration on the part of all his tenants and the inhabitants of the surrounding district.

We must here observe that when the frightful tragedy happened at Lechmere Grange, it was only through a generous consideration for the piteous entreaties which the prince proffered to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine that they could be induced to refrain from giving the whole affair the utmost publicity. Perhaps they likewise thought that the wretched man was sufficiently punished by the contemplation of the fearful ruin which his wickedness had wrought, and that it were better to leave him to the stings of his own conscience than hold him up to the execration of society. Never was there a more piteous spectacle of a proud and wicked man's utter humiliation than that which the prince regent presented when suing for mercy and forbearance, almost at the very feet of the afflicted uncle and lover of the perished girl. Mr. Lawrence Sampson, who was a witness of the scene, felt an indescribable loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary who, in his greedy pursuit of licentious pleasures, had been fated to become the cause of his own innocent and lovely daughter's death. But, for the reasons above glanced at, it was finally resolved by Florimel and Malvern to allow the veil of secrecy to be thrown as much as possible over the incidents which led to the tragedy, and though a coroner's investigation took place, yet the particulars were never published to the world.

Thus, inasmuch as the principal actor in the shocking drama was suffered to go unpunished, it was impossible to hand over the subordinate accomplices in the crime to the hands of justice. But it may be observed, as an illustration of the fact that Heaven often deals retributive justice where man fails to inflict it, that not a single soul who was engaged in the circumstances of that lamentable tragedy prospered long afterward, while the career of some was cut short by a violent death. For instance, Lady Lechmere (the false Mrs. Waldegrave), when visiting the grange three or four years after the catastrophe, was so terrified by the belief that the spirit of the departed girl appeared to her in the middle of the night that she started up from her sleep in the wildest alarm, sprang from her couch, and rushing along the passage in the dark to summon her servants, tripped over a mat, fell with her head in contact against the marble pedestal supporting a statue, and lived but a few minutes to explain to those whom her cries gathered around her the cause of the catastrophe.

At her death, as there was no direct heir to her property, it was all thrown into the court of chancery, the grange was shut up, and the domestics were discharged. The footman, who in the disguise of a labourer had borne his part in the outrage against Florence Eaton, took to the highway, and two or three years afterward suffered for his crimes upon the scaffold; while the three men (also servants in Lady Lechmere's household) who had worn the masks on the memorable night of Miss Eaton's abduction became poachers and were killed in a sanguinary fight with gamekeepers.

From the date of the tragedy at Lechmere Grange everything seemed to go wrong with Mrs. Gale (the fictitious Mrs. Spencer). A fire completely destroyed all her property at the house of infamy in Soho Square, and as she was not insured, the loss was very serious. She however took another house of the same character, though on a less sumptuous scale, but the death of a foreigner which took place there under very suspicious circumstances led to her committal to prison on the coroner's warrant. Newgate was crowded at the time, the gaol-fever broke out, and Mrs. Gale was one of the first victims to its rage.

Sally and Dick Melmoth, after the execution of Daniel Coffin, discovered a considerable sum of money concealed

in the cellar of the house in Fleet Lane, and this they of course appropriated to their own use. Yielding to all kinds of extravagances and plunging into the deepest excesses, they were not long in making away with their resources, and in less than a year they sunk down to the lowest pitch of poverty, at length becoming absorbed in that living mass of demoralization, squalor, and wretchedness which forms the tremendous refuse of our barbarous system of civilization.

As for Jack the Foundling, he conducted himself tolerably well for a few years in the West Indies, but the influence of old habits gradually returning, he was led to self-appropriate some of his employer's money to minister unto his extravagances, and was summarily dismissed his situation. He then returned to England, where accident revealed to him the secret of his birth; or, at all events, he was led, by some means or another, to form a pretty shrewd conjecture upon the point. But his claims upon the Princess Sophia being utterly ignored in that quarter, he became to her a source of incessant annoyance, vexation, persecution, and terror, until the day of her death, which happened but a few years ago. He is still knocking about town, living Heaven only knows how, sunk deep into the slough of dissipation and profligacy, but often exciting the wonder and interest of the frequenters of public-house parlours and tap-rooms by relating the circumstances of his birth, — of which, however, he has but a dim knowledge, so that the greater proportion of the wonderful things he recites are drawn from the fountains of his own imagination.

The Buttoner, having turned king's evidence against his accomplices in the murder of Nell Gibson, had his life spared, but was sentenced to transportation. It was, however, found impossible to carry this judgment into effect, on account of the injuries he had received from the Hangman on the occasion of the affray at Mrs. Young's. He was therefore transferred to the hulks, in the infirmary of which he died within a few months after the trial. As for old Mother Franklin, she succumbed to the serious treatment she received on the same occasion; and Mrs. Young, being compelled to have a limb amputated from a similar cause, took to drinking brandy ere the stump was healed, so that inflammation was brought on, and she died miserably.

William Taggarty continued for some years in his shop

on Mutton Hill, but at length he removed to a better neighbourhood and a larger establishment, and by gradually falling into a different course of business, contrived to amass a fortune without involving himself in the meshes of the law. Instead of buying stolen tea, coffee, pepper, mustard, vinegar, jars of pickles, and so forth, he took to the safer mode of purchasing inferior qualities in a legitimate way, and then adulterating them with all kinds of abominations. By these means — and no possible means are surer to attain the desired end — he rose to the rank of an honest and respectable tradesman, so that at last he became a somewhat important man in his parish, grew great at vestries, filled the office of overseer in a manner hateful to the poor but delightful to the board of guardians, and so completely won the good opinion of the vicar that through this reverend gentleman's influence he obtained the honourable post of churchwarden. While filling that office, no parishioner was more regular in his devotions nor could put on a more sanctimonious countenance than Mr. William Taggarty. Of course this worthy tradesman lived universally respected, although perhaps he himself might occasionally laugh in his sleeve when, having duly sanded his sugar, sloe-leaved his tea, chicoried his coffee, turmeriked his mustard, vitrioled his vinegar, and bone-dusted his arrowroot, he went to church on a Sunday and helped to swell the chorus of " Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable sinners! "

Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston pursued their useful and honourable career to a good old age. These excellent members of the profession were never known to have an angry word with each other. It must, however, be allowed that this might have arisen less from the Christian feeling which animated them than from the circumstance that their undisturbed unanimity was marvellously productive of fees. Doctor Copperas died first, and when his will was opened, the following sentence was found in the document: " I will and bequeath my valuable library of medical works to a gentleman who in private life is adorned with all the qualities calculated to win the esteem and love of those who bask in the sunshine of his friendship, and who as an ornament to his profession stands unrivalled: it is with pleasure that I here record the name of Doctor Thurston." Some three or four years afterward, when Doctor Thurston himself

was summoned to another world, to meet all the patients who had gone thither before him, his last will and testament also contained a passage which we must quote, and which ran as follows: "In bequeathing my valuable collection of books to that philanthropic institution which I and a certain revered friend of mine (recently dead) had the honour and the happiness of founding, I wish it to be distinctly understood that, even if no such name as that of Doctor Thurston had been associated with the establishment of that institution, it would nevertheless have arisen into existence all the same from the humanity as well as the unparalleled talent of that dear deceased friend, Doctor Copperas."

Sir Rolando and Lady Tash managed to live on pretty comfortable terms with each other. They had a large family of children, all of whom were the exact image of the redoubtable officer himself, with the single exception of the eldest son, who bore so striking a resemblance to the prince regent that all friends and acquaintances frequently alluded to the circumstance, no doubt with congratulatory intention, as if it were a remarkable honour to have the lineaments of a member of the royal race reflected in the features of a scion of a private family. But whenever the coincidence was mentioned at the dinner-table, Sir Rolando Tash invariably filled a large tumbler to the brim and tossed it down his capacious throat, while Lady Tash was as constantly seized with a sudden fit of sneezing or coughing, which compelled her to apply her handkerchief to her face.

Lilian Halkin remained abroad for three or four years after the catastrophe of Dover Cliffs, handsomely provided for, in a pecuniary sense, by the bounty of her friends in England. At the expiration of that time a sudden longing took her to return to her native land, but while on her way hither she was seized with a sudden illness at Calais, where she breathed her last. Her remains are interred in the cemetery outside the walls of the town.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson retained his post as chief officer at Bow Street for some years after the period of which our narrative has treated, and when he retired it was to settle down in a neat little villa at Clapton, and enjoy the remainder of his existence in the company of a pretty wife and with the aid of the handsome competence he had acquired during many years of bustle and activity.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Malpas, who had the honour of passing one night with the prince regent at Carlton House, and therefore, as this lady has received such special mention in our narrative, it may be as well to state what afterward became of her. Though she went into mourning for her husband the colonel, when the news of his death reached her, yet she did not particularly grieve for his loss, and precisely one year afterward she was persuaded by Alderman Tubbs, corn-chandler and spectacle-maker (the latter denomination alluding to the particular company to which he belonged), to proceed with him to the altar. Although some thirty years older than herself, with a very red nose and somewhat drunken in his habits as well as snuffy-looking on the front of his shirt, yet being immensely rich and next in rotation for the honours of the mayoralty, the lady could not do otherwise than consent to change her name from the aristocratic one of Malpas to the less euphonious one of Tubbs, and, as the newspapers some time afterward declared, " she fulfilled the high and difficult post of lady mayoress with a mingled dignity and affability which must long dwell in the memory of the citizens of London." It chanced, too, that during the mayoralty an address had to be presented to the prince regent, on which occasion the honour of knighthood was conferred upon her worthy husband, and thenceforth were they known as Sir Jacob and Lady Tubbs. From all we have ever learned, she made an excellent wife for the worthy civic functionary, but when in tender moments of confidence speaking of past events, we believe that she somehow or another always forgot to mention the romantic little adventure which for one night had made her the bedfellow of a prince.

Mrs. Emmerson and Arabella sank down into the deepest poverty, and when they applied to their friends and acquaintances of better days, they experienced the cruelest rebuffs. For about three years they had a sad battle with the world, earning a precarious livelihood by needlework, and often experiencing the direst need. Few, however, who had known them in better times, and who were now acquainted with their distress, pitied them in their latter position, for when living in a mansion and rolling in their carriage at Clapham, they had given themselves such airs

and behaved with so much hauteur and arrogance, that theirs was the very pride which according to poetic justice should experience a fall. At the end of the third year of misery, however, they received a visit from Mr. Theodore Varian, who shed tears on contemplating the picture of distress which their abode and their own personal appearance presented to his view. He told them that times had altered with him, and that fortune had so far smiled upon his industry as to enable him to supply a hundred pounds for their immediate wants, and to promise fifty pounds a year for the future. Having thus explained himself, he did not wait to be thanked, but hurried away, profoundly affected.

Theodore had become the husband of Mary Owen, and a partner in the great mercantile firm of Chapman & Co. He had settled in London, after having for some time ably conducted the branch establishment at Geneva; and as riches accumulated around him, and his name grew associated with many noble deeds of benevolence and charity, seldom did it occur to any one who knew him to pause and ask "whether there were not some queer thing formerly attached to his character." He has proved a good husband and a fond father, Mary making him an excellent wife, and being quoted by all their friends as a pattern mother. There are times when Mr. Varian looks back with sorrow and remorse upon the bitterness with which he pursued Emmerson to the scaffold; but the stings of conscience are deprived of nearly all their poignancy when he thinks of the atonement which he endeavoured to make toward the widow and orphan daughter whom Emmerson had left behind.

Lord and Lady Sackville have religiously fulfilled the determination they made on abandoning a court life, and have ever since devoted themselves to domestic enjoyments. They have never allowed the transactions of the past to intrude upon their minds in such a way as to render them distant and cool to each other, and though that sublime confidence and that exquisite delicacy of feeling which are the elements of pure love can form no part of the bond linking them together, yet a very sincere friendship exists between them, and it may even be called a love after their own fashion. Besides, Sackville has ever been proud of his splendid wife, and she has all along entertained a similar feeling in respect to her handsome husband, and thus, all things considered,

they have lived and still live on happily, comfortably, and sociably enough together. That Lady Sackville has remained faithful to her duty as a wife ever since her retirement from court is beyond all suspicion, and that Horace at the same time settled down into habits equally steady is likewise certain. They have no children, but, on that very account, have exhibited the most devoted attachment to their nephews and nieces, as well as to the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Varian, who are frequent visitors at the country residence which they purchased and where they habitually reside. We may add that from the day on which she quitted Carlton House Lady Sackville never again beheld the prince regent, and though at first he wrote her several letters, it was always her husband that answered them.

We have just spoken of certain nephews and nieces toward whom Lord and Lady Sackville were much attached. The reader has doubtless already guessed that these were the children that blessed the union of the young Marquis of Leveson with the charming and well-beloved Louisa. Such was the case. Never has the world known a happier pair than our noble-hearted hero and our gentle heroine. From the day of their marriage down to the present time (for they are still alive, with a splendid family grown up around them) not a care has disturbed their felicity, not a cloud has darkened the pathway of their existence. In them virtue has been well rewarded, and in the conduct of their sons and daughters do they behold the bright reflection of their own example.

We said that not a single care has intervened to mar their happiness. We should, however, qualify the assertion by stating that there was one incident of sorrow which occurred a few years after their marriage, and this was the death of the excellent Miss Stanley. But that worthy aunt departed not this life ere she had fondled three or four of her niece's children in her arms, and as her earthly career had been characterized by every virtue, so was her death-bed attended by every consolatory and tranquillizing influence.

Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon have likewise been supremely happy in the marriage state, and when in the first years of their union the baronet beheld his beautiful wife radiant with smiles, and when he dandled upon his knees the two blooming boys with which she presented him,

he could not help looking back in surprise and amazement upon the earlier portion of his life, wondering that he had ever been able to find satisfaction or pleasure in the paths of dissipation. He often laughed, too, when worthy Mrs. Baines, who retained the place of housekeeper until the day of her death, reminded him with a jocular air that "after all said and done, it was she herself who had first given him the hint that Ariadne would make him a most excellent wife." And the good woman's prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter.

We have now brought our narrative to a conclusion. Some of our readers, perhaps, might wish us to enter fully into all the persecutions and sufferings which the Princess of Wales continued to endure, until the day of her death, at the hands of her inhuman and remorseless husband, but those are matters which can be perused in any impartial history, to which sources must we refer the inquirer for further information upon the subject. We have now done with the vile and profligate career of that injured princess's husband, and do not purpose to follow him in his misdeeds and debaucheries when he occupied the throne by the title of George IV. But inasmuch as there are incidents of the succeeding reigns which seem to furnish ample food for our pen, and to promise a renewed interest for the reader who is inclined to follow us through such investigation, we conclude our present narrative by inviting attention to a Third Series of the "Mysteries of the Court of London."

END OF VOLUME X.

PR 5221 R35M9 1860 v.10

Reynolds, George William MacArthur
The mysteries of the Court of London

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY